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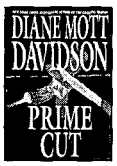

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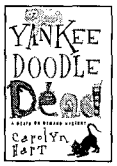

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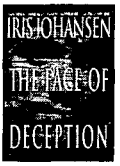

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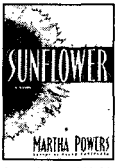

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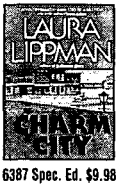

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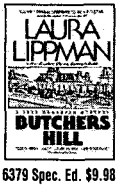

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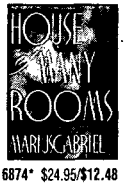

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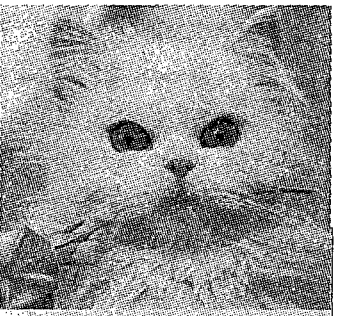

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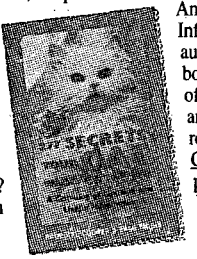

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Art by Mark Evans

NOCTURNE

by Jeffery Deaver

Late Night on the West Side of Manhattan.

The young cop walked past Central Park, through the misty spring air, wondering where was the downpour the Channel 9 meteorologist had promised.

Patrol Officer Anthony Vincenzo turned west. He crossed Columbus, then Broadway, half listening to the static from the speaker/mike of his Motorola Handi-Talkie pinned to the shoulder of his uniform shirt, under the black rain slicker.

He looked at his watch. Nearly eleven P.M. "Hell," he snapped and walked faster. He was in a bad mood because he'd spent most of his tour at the precinct house typing up an arrest report and then accompanying the perp—a young chain snatcher—down to Bellevue because he'd OD'd after he'd been collared. He'd probably swallowed his whole stash before Tony ran him down so that the D.A. wouldn't add a drug count to the larceny.

Which made the cop miss the best part of his beat.

Every night for the last hour of his tour Tony Vincenzo would coincidentally-on-purpose find himself circling a block in the West Seventies, which just happened to be the site of the New York Concert

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Hall, a dark brown auditorium dating from the last century. The building was old and not very well soundproofed. So, if he got close to a window, he could easily hear the performances. Tony considered this a perk of the job. And he felt entitled to it; he'd wanted to be a cop since he was a kid but not just any cop—a detective. The problem was, he was only in his mid twenties and it was hard as hell for a youngster like that to get a gold shield—detective rank—these days. He'd have another four or five years of boring patrol to get through before he'd even be considered for detective division.

The modern master of the twist ending, Jeffery Deaver has been successful in all areas of the mystery field: an Edgar nominee for his short stories; a novelist whose books sell hundreds of thousands of copies in hardcover; a writer whose work is watched by Hollywood and regularly gets bought for TV and film. His scope is sometimes big; sometimes, as in this delightful tale, quite small.

So as long as he was forced to walk a beat, he was going to walk a beat *his* way. With a perk or two. Forget free donuts and coffee; he wanted music.

Which he loved almost as much as he loved being a cop.

Any kind of music. He had Squirrel Nut Zippers CDs. He had Tony Bennett LPs from the fifties and Django Reinhardt disks from the forties. He had Diana Ross on 45s and Fats Waller on 78s. He had the Beatles' *White Album* in every format known to man: CD, LP, eight track, cassette, reel-to-reel. If they'd sold it on piano roll he'd have had one of those too.

Tony even loved classical music and had since he'd been a kid. Which, if you grew up in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, was risky business and could get you pounded bad in the parking lot after school if you admitted it to anybody. But listen to it he did, and admit it he did. He came by this love from his parents. His mother had been a funeral parlor organist before she got pregnant with the first of Tony's three older brothers. She'd quit the job but continued to play at home for the family, on their old upright piano in the living room of their attached house on Fourth. Tony's dad knew music, too. He played concertina and zither and owned probably a thousand LPs, mostly of opera and classic Italian songs.

Tonight, as he walked up to the fire escape of the concert hall, where he liked to perch to listen to the performance, he heard the finale of a symphony, followed by enthusiastic applause and shouts. The New American Symphony Orchestra had been appearing, he saw from the poster, and they'd been playing an all-Mozart program. Tony clicked his tongue angrily, sorry he'd missed the show. Tony liked Mozart; his father had played his *Don Giovanni* LP until it

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wore out. (The old man would pace around the living room, nodding in time to the music, muttering, "Mozart is good, Mozart is good.")

The audience was leaving. Tony took a flyer about an upcoming concert and decided to hang around the stage door. Sometimes he got to talk to the musicians and that could be a big kick.

He ambled up to the corner, turned right, and walked right into the middle of the stickup.

Twenty feet away a young man in a ski mask, sweats, and running shoes was holding a gun in the front pouch of his black sweatshirt. The victim was a tall, immaculate man in a tuxedo—one of the musicians. About fifty-five or so. The mugger was after his violin.

"No," the man cried, "don't take it. You can't!"

Drawing his service Glock, dropping into a crouch, Tony spoke into his mike, "Portable 5588, robbery in progress at Seven Seven and Riverside. Need immediate backup. Suspect is armed."

The perp and the victim both heard and turned toward Tony.

The mugger's eyes went wide with fear as the policeman dropped into a two-handed firing stance. "Hands in the air!" he screamed. "Now! Do it now!"

But the boy was panicked. He froze for a moment then swung the musician in front of him, a shield. The tall man continued to clutch the violin case desperately.

"Please! Don't take it!"

Hands shaking, Tony tried to sight on the mugger's head. But what little skin was visible was as black as the mask and they both blended with the shadows along the street. He had no clear target.

"Don't move," the boy said, voice cracking. "I'll kill him."

Tony stood upright, lifted his left hand, palm outward. "Okay, okay. Look, nobody's hurt yet," he said. "We can work this out."

Sirens sounded in the distance.

"Gimme it!" the boy snapped to the musician.

"No!" The tall man turned and swung his fist at the boy's head.

"Don't!" Tony cried, certain he'd hear the pop of a pistol shot and see the man fall. Then Tony'd have to draw a target and pull the trigger of his own gun, making his first kill in the line of duty.

But the boy didn't shoot. Just then the stage door swung open again and a half-dozen other musicians stepped out. They saw what was happening and scattered in panic—some in between Tony and the mugger. The boy pulled the violin from the musician's grip and turned and fled.

Tony lifted his gun, shouting, "Hold it!"

But the kid kept going. Tony sighted on his back and started to apply pressure to the trigger. Then he stopped and lowered the gun. He sighed and sprinted after the boy but the mugger vanished. A moment later Tony heard a car engine start and an old gray car—he couldn't make out the plate or make—skidded away from the curb and disappeared uptown. He called the getaway in and ran to the

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musician who'd been robbed, helped him to his feet. "You all right, sir?"

"No, I'm not all right," the man spat out, holding his chest. He was bent in agony. His face was bright red and sweat ran from his forehead.

"Are you shot?" Tony asked, thinking he might not have heard the gun if it was just a .22 or .25.

But the musician didn't mean that.

Eyes narrow with fury, he straightened up. "That violin," he said evenly, "was a Stradivarius. It was worth over half a million dollars." He turned his piercing eyes on Tony. "Why the hell didn't you shoot him, Officer? *Why?"*

Sergeant Vic Weber, Tony's supervisor, was first on the scene, followed by two detectives from the precinct. Then, because word got out that Edouard Pitkin, conductor, composer, and first violinist with the New American Symphony, had been robbed of his priceless instrument, four detectives from headquarters showed up. And the media too, of course. Tons of media.

Pitkin, still immaculate except for a slight tear in his monkey-suit slacks, stood with his arms crossed, anger etched into his face. He seemed to be having trouble breathing, but he'd waved off the medics as if spooking irritating flies. He said to Weber, "This is unacceptable. Completely."

Weber, gray-haired and resembling a military rather than police sergeant, was trying to explain. "Mr. Pitkin, I'm sorry for your loss—"

"Loss? You make it sound like my MasterCard was stolen."

"—but there wasn't anything more Officer Vincenzo could do."

"That kid was going to kill me, and he—" Pitkin nodded toward Tony "—let him get away. With my violin. There is no other instrument like that in the world."

Not exactly true, thought Tony, a man raised by a father who loved to dish out musical trivia at the dinner table while his mother dished out tortellini. He remembered the man solemnly telling his wife and children there were about six hundred Antonio Stradivari violins in existence—about half the number the Italian craftsman had made. Tony decided not to share this tidbit with the violinist at the moment.

"Everything went by the book," Weber continued, not much interested in the uniqueness of the stolen merch.

"Well, the book ought to be changed," Pitkin snapped.

"I didn't have a clear target," Tony said, angry that he felt he had to defend himself to a civilian. "You can't go shooting suspects in the back."

"He was a criminal," Pitkin said. "And, my God, it wasn't as if . . . I mean, he was black."

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Weber's face grew still. He glanced at the lead detective, a round man in his forties, who rolled his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Pitkin said quickly. "It's just that it's terrifying, having someone push a gun in your ribs."

"Hey," a reporter shouted from the crowd. "How 'bout a statement?"

Tony was about to say something but the detective said, "No statements at this time. The chief's going to give a press conference in a half-hour."

Another detective walked up to Pitkin. "What can you tell us about the assailant?"

Pitkin thought for a moment. "I guess he was about six feet—"

"Six two," Tony corrected. "He was taller than you." At five seven, Tony Vincenzo was a good observer of height.

Pitkin continued, "He was heavyset." A glance at Weber. "He was *African-American.* He wore a black ski mask and black sweat clothes."

"And red and black Nike Airs," Tony said.

"And an expensive watch. A Rolex. Wonder who he killed to get that." Now Tony got a glance. "Wonder who he's *going* to kill next. Now that he got away."

"Anything else?" the detective asked matter-of-factly.

"Wait. I do remember something. He had powder on his hands. White powder."

The detectives looked at each other. One said, "Drugs. Cocaine. Heroin maybe. Probably needed a fix and you happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Okay, sir, that's helpful. It'll give us something to start with. We'll get on it."

They hurried off to their black Ford and sped away.

A young woman in a red dress walked up to Weber, Tony, and the violinist. "Mr. Pitkin, I'm from the mayor's office," she announced. "His Honor's asked me to convey his deepest apologies on behalf of the people of New York. We're not going to stop until we get that violin back and put your attacker behind bars."

But Pitkin hadn't calmed one bit. He spat out, "This is what I get for coming to places like this. . . ." He nodded toward the concert hall, though he might have meant the whole city. "From now on I'm only doing studio work. . . . What good is it to perform, anyway? The audience sits there like logs, they cough and sneeze, they don't dress up anymore. Do you know what it's like playing Brahms for people wearing blue jeans and T-shirts? . . . And then to have *this* happen!"

"We'll do everything we can, sir," she said. "I promise you."

The violinist hadn't heard her. "That violin. . . . It cost more than my townhouse in Boston."

"Well—" she began.

"It was made in seventeen twenty-two. Paganini played it. Vivaldi owned it for five years. It was in the pit at the first performance of

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La Bohéme. It accompanied Caruso and Maria Callas and when Domingo asked me to play with him at the Albert Hall, *that* was the instrument I played. . . ." His eyes swung to Weber and he asked with genuine curiosity, "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Not really, sir," the sergeant said cheerfully. Then he turned to Tony. "Come over here, I wanna talk to you."

"You know music. Who the hell is this guy?" Weber asked him, as they stood together under the fire escape. There was still no rain, though the mist had coalesced into dense, cold fog.

"Pitkin? He's a conductor and composer. You know. Like Bernstein."

"Who?"

"Leonard Bernstein. *West Side Story.*"

"Oh. You mean he's famous."

"Think of him as the Mick Jagger of the classical circuit."

"Shit. Eyes of the world on us, huh?"

"I'd guess."

"Tell me true. No way you could've capped the perp?"

"Nope," Tony said. "I didn't have a clear target and the backdrop wasn't clean. Slug could've gone anywhere."

Weber sighed and his face grew even more disgruntled than it usually was. "Well, we'll just have to take the heat." He looked at his watch. It was nearly midnight. "Your tour's over. Write up the report and get home."

Tony held up a hand. "I gotta favor."

"What?"

"My eleven-eighteen."

The application form for detective division. Presently sitting with about three thousand other applications. Or, more likely, *under* three thousand other applications.

The wily old sergeant caught on. He grinned. One thing that could get your app shuffled to the top of the deck was collaring a showcase perp—a serial killer, or a shooter who'd killed a cop or a nun, say.

Or the guy who'd stolen half a million bucks' worth of fiddle and embarrassed the mayor.

"You want a piece of the case," Weber said.

"No," Tony answered, not smiling, "I want the whole thing."

"You can't *have* the whole thing. What you can have is four hours. Half-tour. But no overtime. And you work with the detectives." The sergeant looked into the young cop's eyes. Then he sighed. "You're not going to work with the detectives, are you?"

"No."

Weber debated. "Okay. But listen—for this to work, Vincenzo, we need the perp. Not just the damn violin." He nodded toward the woman from the mayor's office. "They need somebody to crucify."

"Understood."

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"Get going. The clock's running."

Tony started east, toward the precinct house, but he stopped and returned to Pitkin and the mayor's aide. He looked up at the musician. "Gotta question. You mentioned Paganini?"

A blink. "I did, yes. What about it?"

"Well, I got a Paganini story. See, one time his friends decided to rag him a little. . . . My dad told me this. Anyway, what they did was they wrote a piece of violin music that was so complicated it couldn't be played. Like, hands just wouldn't work that way. They left it on a music stand and invited him over. Paganini walks into the room and glances at the music then goes into the corner and picks up this violin and tunes it. Then, get this, he looks at his friends and he smiles. And he plays the whole thing perfectly. From memory. Blew them away. Is that a great story, or what?"

Pitkin stared at Tony coldly for a moment. "You should've shot that man, Officer." He turned away and climbed into his limousine. "The Sherry-Netherland," he said. The door slammed shut.

Tony called Jean Marie and told her not to wait up. He was on special assignment.

"It's not dangerous, is it, honey?"

"Naw, they just want me to help out on a case with this music bigwig."

"Really? That's great."

"Get some sleep. Love you."

"Love you too, Tony."

Then he changed into street clothes and drove uptown in his own car. The jeans and sneakers were mostly for comfort. There was no way he could work undercover where he was going—the first pool parlor he walked into, Johnny B's on 125th Street, Tony's was the only white face in the place. And nobody had "cop" written on him as clearly as Tony Vincenzo. But that didn't matter. He wasn't here to fool anybody. He'd worked the street long enough to know there was only one way to get information out of people who weren't otherwise inclined to give it to you: Buying and selling. Of course, he didn't have any snitch money, being just a patrol officer, but he thought he had some negotiable tender to shop with.

"Hey, Sam," he called, walking up to the bar.

"Yo, Tony. Whatchu doing here?" the white-haired old bartender asked in a raspy voice. "Looking for a game?"

"No, I'm looking for an asshole."

"Heh. Got plenty of those here."

"Naw, my boy's gone to ground. 'Jacked something tonight and got away from me."

"Personal, huh?"

Tony didn't answer. "So how's your brother?"

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"Billy? Whatta you think? How'd *you* like it, you spent four years in a ten-by-ten cell and was looking at four more?"

"I wouldn't like it one bit. But I also wouldn't like being the teller he threatened to shoot."

"Yeah, well. He *didn't* shoot her, did he?"

"Tell me, how'd Billy boy like to be looking at maybe *three* years to go 'stead of four?"

Sam poured a beer for Tony. He drank down half of it.

"I dunno," Sam said. "Bet he'd like to be looking at *one* year 'stead of four."

Tony thought for a minute. "How's eighteen months sound?"

"You a beat cop. You can do that?"

Tony decided that he'd have the mayor's support on this one. Cultural New York was at stake. "Yeah, I can do it."

"But listen up. I ain't getting my ass capped for snitching on bad boys."

"I saw him in action. Don't worry. No backup. No gang colors. He also picked on the wrong guy and's going away for a long, long time. He'll be old and gray 'fore he gets out of Ossining."

"Okay. You got a name?"

"No name."

"What's he look like?" Sam asked.

Tony asked, "I look like I can see through ski masks?"

"Oh."

"He's six two, give or take. Heavy. Was wearing black sweats and black and red Nike Airs. Oh, and a fake Rolex."

Because no crook was dumb enough to wear a three-thousand dollar watch on a job—too easy to get messed up or lost.

"And he's a pool player."

"You know that?"

"I know that."

Because whatever the detectives from downtown thought, Tony knew it'd been cue-chalk dust that Pitkin had seen on his hands. No drug dealer or junkie'd be so careless with coke or smack that he'd get that much residue on his hands. And if he did, he'd lick them clean in a second. That's why Tony was here—he knew the perp had to be a serious pool player if he'd got chalk on his hands before a job like this. And while there were a lot of pool parlors in New York City, there weren't many that catered to serious players, and there were fewer still that catered to serious black players.

But, after thinking for a long moment, the bartender shook his head, sad. "Man, I wish I could say I seen him. But I ain't."

"Thanks anyway, Sammy."

He started toward the door.

"Yo, Tony. Wait . . . You know Uptown Billiards?"

"On Lex?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "They had a tournament tonight. Five hunnerd

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bucks. Know a lotta players was there. Check it out. Talk to Izz. Little dude hangs in the back. Tell him you know me and it's cool."

"Okay, it pans out, I'll talk to D of C. Get your brother knocked down."

"Thanks, man. Hey, you want another beer?"

"You still got Smokey Robinson on the box?" He nodded to the jukebox.

Sam frowned indignantly. "'Course I do."

"Good. I'll take a rain check."

At Uptown Billiards Tony's reception was a lot cooler but he found Izz, who *was* little and *was* in the back, though not just hanging out; he was relieving a cocky young shark of a good wad of bills by sweeping the table at eight ball without even paying much attention. After he pocketed the money and watched the loser slink out of the parlor, Izz turned to Tony and lifted a plucked eyebrow.

Tony introduced himself and mentioned Sam's name.

Izz looked at him like he was a bare wall. Tony continued. "I'm looking for somebody." He described the perp.

Without a word, Izz stepped away and made a phone call. Tony heard enough of the conversation to know he'd called Sam and verified the story.

He returned to the table and racked the balls.

"Yeah," Izz said, "guy like that was in here earlier. I remember the Rolex. Took it off and left it on the bar when he played so I knowed it was fake. He was good but he washed out the second round. He was trying too hard, you know what I'm saying? You can't never win, you play that way. Soon as you start trying, you already lost."

"He hangs here?"

"Some. I've seen him around the 'hood. Mostly he keeps to himself."

"What's his name?"

Izz walked to the bar and flipped through a soggy, dog-eared stack of papers. Contestants in the tournament, Tony guessed. "Devon Williams. Yeah, it's gotta be him. I know everybody else on here."

"Got his address?"

It was on 131st Street, just four blocks away.

"Thanks, man. Later."

Izz didn't answer. He sank two balls on the break, one striped, one solid. He walked around the table, muttering, "Decisions, decisions."

Outside, Tony stood on Lexington Avenue, debating. If he called for backup they'd know what was going down and the detectives would swoop in like hawks. They'd snatch the case away from him in a minute. Somebody else'd take the collar and his chance for the boost with his detective application would disappear.

Okay, he decided. I'll handle it solo.

And so, armed with his Glock and his backup revolver strapped to

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his ankle, Tony Vincenzo plunged into residential Harlem. The fog and air were heavy here, absorbing the sounds of the city. It was as if he were in a different time or a different place—maybe a forest or the mountains. Quiet, very quiet, and eerie. A word came to him. A term his father had used once, talking about music. Nocturne. Tony wasn't sure what it meant, but he knew it had to do with night. And he thought it had to do with something peaceful.

Which was pretty damn funny, he decided. Here he was on his way to collar an armed and dangerous perp by himself. And he was thinking about peaceful music.

Nocturne . . .

Five minutes later he was at Devon Williams's tenement.

He turned down the Receive volume of his Motorola speaker/mike and pinned it to the shoulder of his leather jacket, where even if he was shot and down he could still call in a 10-13, officer needs assistance. He clipped his shield to the pocket of the jacket and drew his Glock.

He crept into the lobby, read the directory. Williams lived in one of the second-floor apartments. Tony stepped outside again and climbed the fire escape. The window was open but the curtains were drawn. He couldn't see inside clearly, though he caught a glimpse of Williams walking into what seemed to be the kitchen. He was carrying the violin case and was still in the sweats. Which meant he'd probably still be armed.

A deep breath.

Okay, whatta we do? Backup or not?

No. . . . Once in a lifetime chance. I do it myself, I get the gold shield.

Or get killed.

Don't think about it.

Just go!

Silently Tony climbed through the window into a small parlor. He smelled sour food and dirty clothes. He moved slowly into the hallway and paused, just outside the kitchen. Wiped the sweat off his gun hand.

Okay, do it.

One . . .

Two . . .

Tony froze.

From inside the kitchen came music.

Violin music.

A little scratchy, a little squeaky. A rusty-door sound. But then, as the player worked on some scales, the tone became smooth and resonant.

Hell, it meant somebody else was in there with Williams.

Tony, heart pounding, plastered against the wall, cocked his head as he heard the violinist break into some jazzy riffs.

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So, there were two people inside, maybe more. Williams's fence probably. And the odds were he was armed too.

Now backup?

No, Tony thought. Too late. Nothing to do but go for the collar.

He spun around the corner, crouching. Gun up at eye level.

He shouted, "Freeze! Everybody!"

But there was no everybody. There was only tall, chubby Devon Williams, holding the violin under his chin, the bow gripped in his right hand. Gasping in shock at Tony's entrance.

"Man, you scared the shit outa me." Slowly his shoulders slumped and he let out a sigh. "Man, it's you. The cop."

"You're Devon Williams?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"Put it down."

He slowly set the violin on a table.

"Empty your pockets."

"Yo, man, keep the noise down. There're kids in th'other room. They're sleeping."

"Anybody else?"

"No, just the kids."

"You wouldn't be lying to me now, would you?"

"No, man." He sighed in disgust. "I'm not lying."

"Empty the pockets. I'm not going to tell you again."

He did.

"Where's the piece?" Tony snapped.

"Of what?"

"Don't be cute. Your gun."

"Gun? I don't have one."

"I saw it tonight. At the concert hall."

Williams gestured at the table. "That's what I used." He pointed to a bubblegum cigar, wrapped in cellophane. "I just held it in my pocket. I saw that in a movie one time."

"Don't bullshit me."

"I'm not." He turned his pockets and the pouch of the sweatshirt inside out. They were empty.

Tony eyed him carefully. "How old're you?"

"Seventeen."

"You live here?"

"Yeah."

"Alone?"

"No, man, I told you, the kids."

"They yours?"

He laughed. "They're my brothers and sister."

"Where're your parents?"

Another laugh. "Wherever they are, they ain't here."

Tony cuffed the young man and read him his Miranda rights.

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Thinking: Got the perp, got the fiddle, and nobody's hurt. I'll be Detective Vincenzo by the next cycle.

"Listen, Devon, you give me the name of your fence and I'll tell the D.A. you cooperated."

"I don't have a fence."

"Bullshit. How were you going to move it without a fence?"

"I stole it for me, man. You know, to play."

"You?"

"What I'm saying. Make some money in the subways."

"Why risk hard time? Why didn't you just buy one? It's not like a Beemer. Could've picked one up in a pawn shop for two, three bills."

"Oh, yeah, where'm I gonna get three hundred bucks? My old man, he took off, and my mamma's off with who the hell knows what boyfriend, and I got left with the kids—need food and clothes and day care. So whatta I buy a violin *with,* man? I ain't got no money."

"Where'd you learn to play? In school?"

"Yeah, in school. I was pretty good, too." He gave a smile and Tony caught the glitter of a gold tooth.

"And you, what, dropped out to work?"

"When Daddy took off, yeah. Couple years ago."

"And you just decided you'd take up violin again? 'Cause you can make more money at that than pool. Right?"

Williams blinked. Then laughed, figuring out how he'd been made. "What they pay me stacking boxes at A&P—it just ain't enough, man." He closed his eyes and gave a bitter laugh. "So, I'm going into the system. . . . Hell. Never thought it'd happen to me. Man, I tried hard to stay out. I just wanted to make enough to get my aunt here. From North Carolina. To help take care of the kids. She said she wanted to come, but she ain't got the money. Cost a couple thousand."

"You know what they say. Don't do the crime, you can't do the time."

"Shit." Williams was gazing at the violin.

Tony looked at the young man's dark eyes. He said, "Tell you what I'll do. I'll take those cuffs off for a few minutes, you wanna play a little more."

A faint grin. "Yeah?"

"Sure. But I tell you, you move an inch a way I don't like, I'll park one in your ass."

"No, man. I'm cool."

Tony unhooked the cuffs and stood back, the Glock pointed at his prisoner.

Williams picked up the violin and played another riff. He was getting a feel for it. The sounds were much more resonant, fuller, this time. He launched into "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" and played some variations on it. Then a few little classical exercises. Some Bach, Tony thought. A bit of "Ain't Misbehavin'," too. And a few pieces he

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remembered his mother playing when he was a boy. Finally, Williams finished, sighed, and tossed the instrument into the case. He nodded toward it. "Funny, ain't it? You think about stealing something for months and months and you finally get it up to do it and you do it, and what happens but you get an old piece of crap like this, all messed up and everything."

Tony, too, looked at the nicks in the wood, the scratches, the worn neck.

It cost the same as my townhouse in Boston. . . .

"Okay, son, I'm gonna call Child Protective Services. They'll take good care of your brothers and sister."

The smile faded from Williams's face. "Man," he said. "Man."

Tony picked up the handcuffs from the table.

The Sherry-Netherland seemed pretty stark to Tony Vincenzo, who judged the quality of hotels by the length of the happy hour and the square footage of chrome in the lobby. But this was rich-person territory, and what did he know about rich people?

It was small, too. And it looked even smaller because it was filled with reporters and cops. Along with the woman in the red dress, from the mayor's office. Sergeant Weber was here too, looking pissed he'd been called out of bed at two A.M. to appear at a dog-and-pony show for an asshole from Boston, however famous he was.

Tony walked into the lobby, carrying the violin under his arm. He stopped in front of Weber, whose perpetual frown deepened slightly as he waved off reporters' questions.

Beaming, a coiffed Edouard Pitkin, wearing a suit and tie, Jesus, at this hour, stepped out of the elevator and into the glare of the lights. He strode forward to take the violin. But Tony didn't offer it to him. Instead, he merely shook the musician's hand.

Pitkin dropped the beat for a moment, then—aware of the press—smiled again and said, "What can I say, Officer? Thank you so much."

"For what?"

Another beat. "Well, for recovering my Stradivarius."

Tony gave a short laugh. Pitkin frowned. Then the cop motioned to the back of the crowd. "Come on, don't be shy."

Devon Williams, wearing his A&P uniform and work shoes, walked awkwardly through the forest of reporters.

Pitkin spun to Weber. "Why isn't he in handcuffs?" he raged.

The sergeant looked at Tony, silently asking the same question.

Tony shook his head. "I mean, why would I cuff the guy recovered your violin?"

"He . . . what?"

"Tell us what happened," a reporter shouted.

Weber nodded and Tony stepped into the crescent of reporters. He cleared his throat. "I spotted the perpetrator on One hundred

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twenty-fifth Street carrying the instrument in question and gave pursuit. This young man, Devon Williams, at great risk to himself, intervened and tackled the assailant. He was able to rescue the instrument. The perpetrator fled. I pursued him, but unfortunately he got away."

He'd worried that this might sound too rehearsed, which it was. But, hell, everybody's used to copspeak. If you sound too normal nobody believes you.

Pitkin said, "But . . . I just thought he looked like . . . I mean . . ."

Tony said, "I saw the perpetrator without the ski mask. He looked nothing like Mr. Williams." A glance at Pitkin. "Other than the fact they were both African-American. I asked Mr. Williams to join us here so he could collect his reward. He said no, but I pretty much insisted he come. I think good citizenship ought to be, you know, encouraged."

A reporter called, "How much is the reward, Mr. Pitkin?"

"Well, I hadn't . . . it's five thousand dollars."

"What?" Tony whispered, frowning.

"But ten if the instrument's undamaged," Pitkin added quickly.

Tony smiled and handed him the case. The musician turned abruptly and walked to a table near the front desk. He opened the case and examined the violin carefully.

Tony called, "It's undamaged, right?"

"Yes, yes, yes, it's in fine shape."

Weber crooked his finger toward Tony. They stepped into the corner of the lobby. "So what the hell happened?" the sergeant muttered.

Tony shrugged. "Just what I said."

The sergeant sighed. "You don't have a perp?"

"Got away."

"This ain't gonna do shit for your application."

"Figured that."

Weber continued in a coy voice, "But then, you probably wouldn't want this *particular* case to go on the report anyway, would you?"

"Naw, I probably wouldn't."

"Tough break."

"Yeah," Tony said. "Tough."

"Hey, Mr. Williams," a reporter called. "Mr. Williams?"

Williams looked around, not really used to a "Mr." being joined with his last name.

"Oh, what?" he asked, catching on.

"Could you come over here, answer some questions?"

"Uhm, yeah, I guess."

As the young man walked uneasily to the growing crowd of reporters, Tony leaned forward and, a big smile on his face, caught him by the arm. The boy stopped and lowered his ear to Tony, who

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whispered, "Devon, I gotta get home but I'm just checking . . . Your aunt gets up here, she's making me ham hocks and collards, right?"

"She's the best."

"And the rest of that money's going in an account for the kids?"

Another gold-toothed grin. "You bet, Officer." They shook hands.

Tony pulled on his rain slicker as Williams stopped in front of the cameras. Tony paused at the revolving doors, looked back.

"Mr. Williams, tell us: You like music?"

"Uh, yeah. I like music."

"You like rap?"

"Naw, I don't like it too much."

"Do you play anything?"

"Uh, no."

"After this incident, do you think you might want to take up the violin?"

"Well, sure." He glanced toward Edouard Pitkin. The musician looked back at the young man as if he were from outer space. Holding Pitkin's eye, Williams continued, "I've seen people play 'em and it doesn't seem that hard. I mean, that's just my opinion, you know."

"Mr. Williams, one more question . . ."

Tony Vincenzo pushed outside into the night, where the fog and the rain had finally started to fall—steadily and chill but oddly quiet. Jean Marie was asleep, but he still wanted to get home. Have a beer, put on a CD. He knew what he wanted to listen to. Mozart was good. Smokey Robinson was better. ●

"The next time my wife comes to visit me — tell her I've escaped!"

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THE BROKEN CHAIN

by Edward D. Hoch

"The Alexander Swift Revolutionary War stories seem to be taking on the appearance of a serial novel, with a new chapter every (few) months," said Ed Hoch in a recent letter. The tale of Benedict Arnold, in particular, is being slowly and skillfully unfolded in these tales. Congratulations to Ed on a fine series —and on his recent Anthony Award for best story of 1997!

The secret intelligence report that the British might have an American traitor at West Point had caused General Washington to send Alexander Swift hurrying back there in early September of 1780. Since August third, Major General Benedict Arnold had been in command at West Point, establishing his headquarters at Robinson House, a confiscated private residence on the east bank of the Hudson.

Arriving at the fort's familiar ramparts after an all-night ride through enemy lines, Swift could barely make out the two-story Robinson House through the morning mist on the Hudson. The first friendly face he saw was that of Major Jasper, an old-timer who'd fought with Washington during the French and Indian War and was now the chief legal officer at the fort. Jasper knew Swift only as one of the traders and fur merchants who frequented the area, and who'd played an important part in saving Washington's Hudson chain two years earlier. But perhaps he suspected more.

"How are things going here, Major?" Swift asked after they'd exchanged the usual amenities.

Jasper shrugged. "General Arnold's making a great many changes. You won't like what's happening to that chain you saved from the British attack."

Alexander Swift frowned at the words. Saving the Hudson chain had been one of his main accomplishments. "What do you mean?"

"One of the center links was damaged and the general feared it was coming apart. He ordered it removed, to be repaired or replaced."

The great chain across the Hudson at West Point had been placed there by order of General Washington, to keep British ships from sailing up the river. It was a serious matter if the chain had been removed without Washington's knowledge. "The blacksmiths will

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take weeks at that job," said Swift. "How is the river to be blocked in the meantime?"

"The great chain is held together by a strand of rope," Major Jasper muttered. "A loaded ship could easily snap it."

"Has any officer complained about this?"

"You don't complain to General Arnold. He sent four hundred men on a detail to cut wood at Fishkill, even though his second in command, Colonel Lamb, warned that he was compromising the safety of the fort. We would be better served by completing the fort's western wall before we worry about wood for a winter we may never live to see."

"Is it really that bad?"

"It is. You must believe me."

Swift nodded. "I know Benedict Arnold. I was at his wedding. I will row across the river and call on him tomorrow."

A short distance from the fort itself was a small settlement serving the needs of the troops. On his visits Swift had always taken a room at a tavern called the Nugget of Gold. After his wife Amanda left him for a British officer, he'd developed a close friendship with Molly McVey, a waitress at the tavern. She'd traveled with him more than once, and had been his companion at Benedict Arnold's wedding in Philadelphia the previous year. Molly was a slender, dark-haired young woman, a year or two older than Swift, with a milk-white complexion and a way of handling herself among the denizens of an army fort.

"How was New York?" she asked as she placed a schooner of beer on the table in front of him. She knew of his undercover missions for General Washington, which had taken him into the British-occupied city on a couple of occasions.

"Good." He kept his voice low. "The people grow restless. There are rumors of a British pullout."

"Did you see your former wife?" It was a question he'd known she would ask.

"Yes. The British officer she married is dead now."

Molly drew a sharp breath. "And she wants you back."

"At this point Amanda doesn't know what she wants, or even which side she's on." He said no more. Only General Washington had been informed that Amanda was the source of the secret intelligence about a traitor at West Point.

"Will you be staying the night?" Molly asked as she moved on to the next table.

"I have my usual room."

Later that night, when they were alone, he asked her about the Hudson chain. "It's true," she replied. "General Arnold himself ordered the link removed and repaired. Everyone knows the rope holding the two parts together is useless."

"Why would he do such a thing?" Swift wondered.

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"Ever since I met him in Philadelphia I've thought him a strange man, walking with his stick like some wounded beast."

"That wound was suffered at Saratoga, fighting for our freedom. His horse was shot out from under him and shattered his leg when it fell."

"Some who've visited him at Robinson House say he uses the living room for his office, and with a spy glass on his desk he can observe activity at West Point."

"He controls an area of some sixty square miles. It's not surprising that he would want to keep a close eye on it." Swift realized he was being defensive of Benedict Arnold, perhaps overly defensive. He did not want to tell Molly there might be a traitor at West Point, and he especially didn't want to tell her the information had come from Amanda.

At the first light of dawn Swift took a rowboat across the river to Robinson House. It was an easy journey because the estate, confiscated from Colonel Robinson when he went over to the British side, lay slightly south of West Point and he was able to travel with the current. It was only in the final stage that he had to pull in to shore, aiming for a small dock below the high bluff of Robinson House. Arnold had an old whaleboat secured there, with a crew of six at his constant disposal to ferry him quickly to West Point or other destinations on the river.

Swift announced his presence and one of the men escorted him up the steep path to the house. He'd never been there before, and was surprised at the wild and gloomy setting of the two-story home, nestled among rocks and wooded ravines in the desolate Hudson Highlands. He doubted if there was another house within a mile. The living room which now served as Arnold's headquarters was a large square area with a fieldstone fireplace and oak ceiling beams, opening onto a terrace and garden.

General Arnold sat at his desk, working by candlelight since the bright morning sun had not yet reached the windows that faced west. His left leg was out straight in front of him and the thick walking stick was close at hand. On the desk was the powerful spy glass Molly had mentioned.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Swift," he said, extending his hand in greeting. "Pardon me for not rising."

"Excuse me for interrupting your work. Is Mrs. Arnold well?"

"Quite well, thank you. She is arranging to come here from Philadelphia with the baby within the week. My aide, Major Franks, has already been dispatched to escort her."

"I had heard you had a son."

Arnold nodded. "He'll grow into a fine lad. But tell me, did Washington send you?"

"He asked that I return to West Point and pay my respects to you while I was here." Washington had left it to Swift's discretion whether

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or not to advise Arnold of the report of a traitor. The news of the broken chain was bothersome and for the time being he decided to say nothing about a traitor. The chain itself was another matter, however.

"I'm always glad to see you," Arnold told him. "I've only been here for a month, but Peggy and I will soon be settled in with two of my aides and a few servants. This is a charming house with a fine view of the Hudson and West Point."

"I can see that."

"How is the river flowing this morning?"

"Moderately, I would say. I understand there has been a problem with the chain."

"A weak link, but it will soon be repaired. I know that is Washington's personal project, and I will see to it."

"In the meantime the chain is useless against the British."

Arnold smiled slyly, shifting his leg to a more comfortable position. "But they do not know that, nor will they, until the chain is once more whole."

"I take a special interest in it because once before I saved it from destruction."

"I understand that, and you have been a great help to General Washington. Your efforts will not go unrewarded."

They talked a bit longer, and when Swift was ready to depart Arnold suggested that one of the whaleboat crew could row him across the river. "I can manage it," Swift told him. "But thank you for the offer."

As he hurried down the path to his own boat, he wondered if there wasn't something just a bit sinister in Arnold's offer of the oarsman. At the dock, a muscular sailor named Pierre repeated the offer, but Swift once more declined. Instead he rowed himself upriver to the giant chain and examined it for himself. It was as Major Jasper and Molly had said. The chain was tied together with a simple rope, no stronger than a cobweb against the thrust of a heavy-sailing ship.

Norb Flander, a red-faced man in his fifties, had opened the Nugget of Gold after fleeing the British occupation of New York City four years earlier. Alexander Swift had passed many an hour in conversation with him at the bar of his tavern, especially on those occasions when Molly was away.

"Come have a beer with us, Alex," he called out as Swift returned to the Nugget of Gold just after noon that day.

Flander's drinking companion was Nathan Irving, a traveling sutler who set up his tent near army posts and sold provisions to the soldiers. Swift knew him slightly and greeted him with a handshake. "What are you selling these days, Nathan?"

"Horses," came the reply. The short, bearded man grinned, showing the gap of a missing front tooth. "I go right to the top now, no more selling tobacco and powder horns to the troops. I have an

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agreement to sell fifty horses right here at West Point."

"Where are you getting fifty horses?" Swift wondered.

"Up in Canada. I'm bringing them down next week. I figure you can use them here. Rumor is that the British warship *Vulture* is moving slowly up the river."

"Where?" Swift asked, trying to make it a casual question.

"South of Dobbs Ferry."

"That's far enough away."

Norb Flander brought more beer from his bar. "This one is on me," he said. "I saw you out on the river earlier, Alex. What were you up to?"

"I rowed across to pay my respects to General Arnold."

They chatted for a time about the progress of the war against the British. Then, promptly at one o'clock, Molly came down from her room to start her afternoon shift, cleaning off the tables and sweeping the floor. "You gents will have to move," she told them. "I've work to do here. That includes you, Norb."

He chuckled. "Nothing like the hired help ordering me about! What say you to a game of cards, gentlemen?"

But Swift and Irving both had other things on their mind. Irving had to meet with Major Jasper to conclude the sale of the horses, and Swift wanted to check on Jasper's report that four hundred troops had been sent to Fishkill, some twenty-five miles away, to cut wood for the winter. He found Sergeant Driscoll, the fort's top enlisted man, at his desk at headquarters.

"Well, Alex, I heard you were back," he said in his familiar gravelly voice. He was a bulky man in his fifties, with a weather-beaten face and a reputation of having been an Indian fighter in his younger days. "What are you up to on this trip?"

Swift gave him a wink. "I had to sneak into New York to visit some lady friends."

"I wouldn't be surprised at anything you do, but I wish you'd do it in the Continental Army like the rest of us."

"I can get killed just as quickly out of uniform," he assured the sergeant. "I'm here for some information. Is it true that General Arnold sent four hundred troops to Fishkill to cut wood?"

Sergeant Driscoll studied his face before responding. Then he asked, "Why do you want to know?"

"The word is that the great chain is under repair and a British warship, the *Vulture*, is sailing north on the Hudson. It seems a bad time for so many men to be away from the fort."

"Two hundred men were already chopping wood," the sergeant said. "General Arnold doubled the number to finish the task more quickly."

"That seems a sensible course to follow," Swift agreed. "And perhaps it would be, were it not for the damaged chain and the *Vulture* under sail."

Driscoll seemed to have more to say, but his reluctance got the bet-

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ter of him. "Look here, Alex, will you be at the Nugget of Gold tonight?"

"I can arrange it."

The gravel-voiced sergeant grinned. "I'll let you buy me a beer and we can talk some more."

The Nugget of Gold always filled rapidly after the officers and enlisted men went off duty at the end of the day. There was very little else for them to do except drink or gamble, and the Nugget provided an opportunity for either vice. Norb Flander employed two barmaids who had rooms upstairs. Molly refused to become too friendly with the customers, turning them away with a gentle but firm hand. This was not always true of Willow Reece. That evening when Swift arrived he saw that all of Molly's tables were already full so he sat at the bar, a long plank supported by barrels, and ordered a tankard of ale from Willow, a half-breed Iroquois woman whose dark beauty made her popular with the soldiers.

"Looks like a busy night, Willow," he told her as she filled his tankard.

"Always is, around payday."

There was no sign of Sergeant Driscoll, but he saw that Flander had started a card game at a corner table. Paydays for the Continental Army were an uncertain thing at best, but apparently this month the money had come through. A little later in the evening Major Jasper came in, looking for Irving, the horse dealer. Norb Flander called over from the corner card table, "He'll be here, Major. If he's in town he never misses a game on payday. Sit down and have a beer. We need a fourth for whist." Everyone knew that Flander's whist games always evolved into Dummy or a variation known as Boston which allowed betting on the result.

Molly was as busy as the other barmaid and Swift only had a brief opportunity to speak with her, agreeing to see her upstairs after the Nugget closed. He had another ale but the place was getting noisy and he could feel a headache coming on. He retreated to his room and locked the door, planning to rest for a half-hour before returning to see Sergeant Driscoll.

The rooms at the Nugget of Gold had space for little more than a bed, a wash bowl, and a curtained-off section for hanging clothing. A chamber pot was provided under the bed. The facilities were bare but adequate for his visits. He glanced around at them as he sat on the bed and felt the room begin to spin. Stretching out on the bed, eyes tightly closed, he could still hear the faint sounds from the tavern below. Then a cloud seemed to settle on him like fog over the Hudson.

The next thing he knew, Molly was shaking him awake. "Alex, Alex! What happened?" she whispered.

"What?" He struggled to regain his senses. "What time is it?" He realized there was something sticky in his hand. He focused his eyes

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on a hunting knife, its blade covered with blood. "My God! What's happened?"

Molly leaned toward him and rested her hands on his chest, saying very quietly, "Willow's body is on the floor. She's been stabbed."

He sat up in bed, trying to clear his thoughts. He could see Willow's body now by the lamp that Molly held, but he still couldn't believe it. "I only dozed off for a minute," he insisted. "I was waiting for you."

"What time did you come up here?"

"Around ten, I think."

"It's after midnight now."

He turned to her with pleading eyes. "You can't believe I did this."

"Of course not! But someone wants it to look like you did. We have to get her out of here before—"

But already it was too late for that. The door was pushed open by Norb Flander. "What happened here, Alex?" he asked, ignoring Molly's presence. "I heard a woman scream."

"I think I was knocked out or drugged somehow. Molly found me just now."

Major Jasper crowded into the room behind Flander. He knelt by the body and then stood up. "What time did Willow leave work?" he asked.

It was Molly who answered. "About an hour ago. She said she wasn't feeling well and I told her to go to bed. The crowd downstairs had thinned and I knew I could handle the rest."

"Did you notice anyone follow her upstairs?"

"No," Molly admitted. "But I wouldn't be likely to."

Major Jasper turned to Swift. "I'm sorry, Alex, but this woman has been murdered in your room. I'll have to take you to the fort for further questioning."

He had little choice. While he got a jacket from behind the curtain, Molly said to him, "I'll see what I can find out. Don't worry."

He waited until he was alone with Major Jasper, being escorted down the hill to the fort, before he spoke. "You know I didn't kill that girl. Someone is trying to frame me."

"Why should they do that?" the officer asked.

"Because I've been asking too many questions since I returned here yesterday. About that broken chain and the detachment of soldiers chopping wood at Fishkill. It's not just that chain of iron that's broken. It's the chain of loyalty holding the Confederation together. If there is a traitor here at West Point, he wants me silenced."

"Then why didn't he simply kill you instead of Willow?"

"A good question." He remembered the oarsman Pierre's offer to row him back to West Point from Arnold's headquarters that morning. "Perhaps he tried to, and failed. Or perhaps he needs to discredit me first in General Washington's eyes."

After some preliminary questioning Swift was taken to the guardhouse and locked in a cell. He knew there was little chance of further

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sleep that night, though his head was not yet clear. The arrival of Molly just after dawn was a welcome sight. "I brought you some food," she said. "The guards all know me."

"Is there any news?"

She glanced around, making certain no one could overhear the conversation, and produced a small package from the folds of her skirt. "After Jasper left with you and they took away her body, I sneaked into Willow's room. The same key opens all the doors. Hidden in one of her drawers I found these dried herbs labeled for different purposes. One was to rouse men's passions. Another was to put them to sleep. I saw her serving you tankards of ale last night. She could easily have slipped these ground-up herbs into the tankard."

"And she wasn't trying to rouse my passions. Good work, Molly!"

She slipped the package between the bars and he dropped it into his pocket.

"But who put her up to it?"

"The same person who killed her, obviously. No one else would have known what she was doing. He probably paid her to drug my ale and told her to be in my room at a certain time. He met her there and stabbed her, then left the bloody knife in my hand."

"But who?" she repeated.

"Do you know an oarsman named Pierre? Right now he's assigned to General Arnold's whaleboat."

"I know the man. I wouldn't trust him."

"Was he at the Nugget last night?"

"I didn't see him, but the place was crowded. He might have come in the back entrance and sneaked upstairs before I noticed."

"Try to find out if he was friendly with Willow." He realized his suspicions of Pierre were based on nothing more than the look on the man's face when he offered to row him across the river. Still, it was the only suspicion he had. He'd spoken to Arnold about the broken chain, and someone could have observed him later rowing up to it in his boat. He remembered the powerful spy glass on Arnold's desk, and the windows with their view of the river.

"I'll do what I can," Molly promised. Their hands touched briefly through the bars and then she was gone.

The morning dragged on for Alexander Swift, and it was ten o'clock before Major Jasper summoned him for more questioning. He sat quietly across the desk while the older man glanced through some papers. Then Jasper lifted his head and asked, "Do you still think someone is trying to frame you for this?"

"I'm convinced of it. I never would have taken Willow Reece to my room. I'm sure you know I have a close relationship with Molly McVey."

"Close enough to make her jealous if she found Willow in your room?"

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"Do you think Molly killed her?" Swift's anger was beginning to boil over. Until now he had considered Jasper a friend.

"It's just a possibility."

"No, it isn't a possibility! I went up to my room around ten and passed out on the bed, probably because of something Willow slipped into my ale. Molly told me Willow said she was feeling ill and went upstairs around eleven. Molly couldn't have followed her up because she was the only one left to wait on customers. Even Norb Flander, her boss, was busy with a card game."

"But she was there when you woke up."

"By that time the blood on the knife was sticky, almost dry. Willow must have been killed closer to eleven, right after she came up to my room. Did you notice anyone go upstairs around that time?"

Major Jasper frowned. "No one. I'd been waiting for Nathan Irving, the horse trader, and he finally came in about that time. We were finishing up our business."

"Who was in the card game with Flander?"

"Let's see—there was Sergeant Driscoll and two of the cooks. I don't know their names. I watched them playing Boston and Dummy for a while before Irving showed up." He smiled suddenly. "Who's doing the questioning here?"

"You are, Major. I just thought I could help you out."

"Now it's my turn. Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"What do you mean?"

"A guard saw Molly McVey slip you a small package when she visited you this morning. She brought you food too but you slipped this package into your pocket."

He didn't know which side Major Jasper was on, but he was in a spot where he had to trust someone. He took the package of dried herbs from his pocket and handed it over. "Molly found them in Willow's room. I think she drugged my ale with this one."

Jasper sighed and poured out a bit of the herb on his desk. "You know, I think I believe you, Alex. You weren't going to show this to me, were you?"

"Not yet. I have to get out of here, Major. I believe West Point to be in grave danger." His mind seemed clear for the first time since the previous night. "I might even be able to show you Willow's real killer."

"Keep talking."

Swift did, and finally the major stood up. "I'm taking a chance. We're going to leave here and walk back up to the Nugget of Gold. Who knows what might happen on the way? You might even escape."

"Or be shot."

"That, too," the major conceded. "I think it depends on how much we trust one another."

A few minutes later they left the stockade together and started up the hill. Major Jasper had his hand on the loaded flintlock pistol in his belt.

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It was still morning and the Nugget of Gold was all but deserted. There was no one at the bar and only Sergeant Driscoll sat at one of the tables, chatting with Norb Flander. Both men seemed surprised when Alexander Swift entered alone. "Did you break out of the stockade?" Flander asked with a smile.

"Something like that. You're the man I wanted to see last night, Sergeant. Sorry we didn't get together."

"They said you'd gone upstairs."

"I had to lie down for a bit," Swift said. "Can we talk now?"

"Sure. I just came over, hoping you'd be here."

Flander left them alone, returning to his task of washing out the glasses and mugs from the previous night. While he was busy with his work Swift told the sergeant, "Yesterday we were talking about the British warship *Vulture*. Is she planning an attack on West Point?"

"No, not from what I hear."

"What, then?"

"I don't know, exactly. She's said to be carrying some mysterious passenger, but for what purpose, no one knows."

"Interesting. I believe that's something General Washington should know about. I'll be riding out in the morning to contact him."

He rose and shook the sergeant's hand, ending their conversation. Waving a greeting to Norb Flander, he headed for the stairs. He unlocked the door to his room and stretched out on the bed, much as he'd done the night before. Within minutes he heard someone at the lock, and the door began to open.

"Come in, Norb," he said. "I've been expecting you."

The proprietor of the Nugget stepped inside. In one hand he held a hunting knife, the twin to the one that had killed Willow. "You have to understand this is war, Alex. It is nothing personal."

He lunged at Swift on the bed, but suddenly Major Jasper appeared from behind the curtain, grabbing his arm. "No more killings, Norb. The war is over for you."

Norb Flander sat down on the bed and covered his face. "How did you—?"

It was Major Jasper who answered him. "Alex persuaded me on the way over here that you could be the guilty man. We found Sergeant Driscoll and sent him in ahead of us. Then Alex went in to have his conversation with Driscoll, just loud enough for you to overhear, while I slipped in through the back door and came up here to his room. If you were guilty, we thought you'd try to keep Alex from contacting General Washington."

Sergeant Driscoll had joined them, standing against the door in the event Flander tried to escape. "But you wonder how I knew it was you," Alexander said to the innkeeper. "I'll tell you how I knew. It had to be Willow who drugged me with those Indian herbs. They

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were in her room and she was the one who served me the ale. Then she came to my room, either arriving with her killer or meeting him there. In either event, there were two people in on the plot, and we can assume the other person urged her to drug me. It had to be someone who could persuade Willow to take part in this. Her employer seemed a likely person."

"But why would he kill her?" Driscoll asked.

"It was important to someone that I be removed from the scene. I was snooping around, asking the wrong questions. Willow was killed so I could be framed for her murder and locked up in the stockade. She was merely a pawn to be sacrificed. It was Flander who arrived at my room with Major Jasper, claiming he'd heard a woman scream. But that would have been impossible. Willow and Molly were the only women here, and Willow had been dead nearly an hour by that time. Her blood on the knife was almost dry. Molly was there, but I awakened to her whispers. She was purposely keeping her voice low, certainly not screaming."

"But Norb was playing cards with us the whole time!" the sergeant objected.

Alexander Swift shook his head. "I don't think so. One of the games you mentioned playing was Dummy, a three-handed variation of whist. As the name implies, it is played with a dummy. When Flander was dummy he could have wandered over to the bar or to the outhouse, then easily gone upstairs from there. He was always in charge of the games and I'm sure he suggested which ones would be played."

"Did someone put you up to this?" Major Jasper asked Flander.

"There are things you have to do, for your country," the innkeeper answered.

"For the British?"

"For your country."

Molly appeared then, running up the stairs to Swift's room. She paused, staring at them, and seemed to know everything from their faces.

Later, as Alexander Swift sat alone on a parade-ground bench, Major Jasper came to him. "We've learned a little, not much. The warship *Vulture* rests at anchor carrying a British officer, Major John André. He is waiting to make contact with someone here at West Point. Flander would not give us the name."

In the afternoon light Swift could just make out the house on the hill across the river. "Never mind. I believe I know the name."

"Will you tell General Washington?"

"It is a grave accusation. I must have proof. And I must have it quickly, within the week."

"What happens then?" Jasper asked.

"General Arnold's wife and son will arrive here from Philadelphia."●

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Art by Allen Davis

NEST OF VIPERS

by Peter Turnbull

MONDAY

The man was not displeased with his purchase. He had not been rushed into parting with his money but had taken his time, shopped around, looking in the vicinity of the Greater Glasgow area for a full eighteen months, spending days there before returning to his house in Camden. When he returned to London he took with him his thoughts and feelings about his prospective purchases, knowing that one would rise above the others in his mind. That was exactly what had happened. As he sat in his drawing room enjoying a glass of chilled Frascati, watching the sun sink behind the London skyline, he knew, suddenly, which to purchase. Following a favourable survey he offered a reasonable sum with a tight, twenty-four-hour accept-or-decline decision. His offer was swiftly accepted by grateful trustees, and Michael Grant became the owner of Barfillon House, near Kilsyth, north of the city of Glasgow. The house had been built in Victorian times. Its original owner was a shipping magnate, owner of Barfillon Lines. Later in its history, it had become a private school, and when Michael Grant saw it, it was empty. It had

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been so for eleven years and was sliding towards a state of dereliction. It had a total of twenty-five rooms, many outbuildings, and stood in thirty acres of landscaped garden, privet and hawthorn hedge bounding grass. The wood beyond the grounds at the rear of the house also belonged to the property. The price he had paid had been fair and reasonable and that, somehow, made his ownership of it more pleasing.

Michael Grant paced his house room by room; he had a light step for a large man and moved silently, the only sound being the scratching of his dogs' claws on the bare floorboards. He was pleased that he had their company. He knew that he was alone and that the house, being empty, would not be at all of interest to burglars, but they were company, they were emotional support, and they would react to an intruder, if any showed. Dobermans are like that, sleek black things of beauty.

He left the house and walked into the grounds, badly overgrown, eleven seasons of growth smothering the landscaping. He allowed the dogs to roam in the grounds: He knew that it was imperative for them to become familiar with their new territory. He fought his way to the bottom of the garden at the rear of the house and turned and looked at Barfillon House and pondered that he was lord of all he surveyed. Not bad, he thought, not bad, no, not bad at all. He'd left Glasgow when he was sixteen, a wee street turk from Partick. He'd pulled it off, and now he had returned, thirty-seven years later, and purchased Barfillon House, Kilsyth. He bit his lip. He'd have liked to have married. He would have liked that, but it didn't happen, and that was just the way of it sometimes and he consoled himself that no marriage is far better than a bad marriage. He thought that he would devote the rest of his years to his house, doing as much of the work himself as he could do. He knew it would take him a long time to get the house up to scratch, restored to its former splendour, and a lot of money also, perhaps as much as the purchase price. He had plenty of time and with luck he would have sufficient money. But it did worry him that he would have no one to pass it on to, no relatives save a distant cousin or two who could be traced if necessary, but no one closer than that. It was more than a looming possibility for Michael Grant that he would soon have to leaf through the *Charities Digest* and choose one or two causes to will his fortune to. He heard

It has been said of Peter Turnbull's crime novels that they are "reassuringly familiar in form" (Ian Bell /*St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers).* The same could be said of his short stories featuring Glasgow's P Division; readers come to know roughly what the procedures of the investigation will be, and are therefore free to sit back and enjoy the interesting panoply of characters. ¶

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his dogs rustling in the long grass, moving towards him. He turned and saw that one had a large object in its mouth; they were bringing him a gift as they did from time to time. They approached and the gift was dropped at his feet. It was a skull. A human skull.

"Followed the dogs' spoor." Michael Grant looked over his garden. "Traced the skull back to a pit in the wood, there beyond the garden, classic shallow grave. Returned to the house and phoned you immediately. Two uniform boys arrived and I gave them directions."

"I see, sir." Ray Sussock nodded. He too looked out over the expanse of ground to the wood wherein uniformed police officers could occasionally be glimpsed within the foliage. "How long have you been the owner of the house, sir?"

"Five days." Grant smiled. "As you see, it's in a bit of a state at the moment. It's been empty for ten or eleven years and allowed to run down for some time before that, or so I was advised. I purchased it from a firm of solicitors who were acting as trustees of the estate, the previous owner having no heirs. That's a bit close to home for me."

"The wood, does it belong to you?" Sussock couldn't help draw a contrast between himself and Michael Grant. He was a little older than Grant, but by less than ten years. He had a small bedsit in a large house for his home; he did have an heir, a son who lived with his mother, Sussock's wife, in what had been their family home in Rutherglen. In fact, the only thing he and Grant had in common was that his home was also being allowed to fall into a state of dereliction and his garden was also overgrown. But that's life, some make it, some don't. He in his bedsit, Michael Grant in his mansion. Run-down, stripped of all contents, windows broken by local youths, but a mansion nonetheless and a park for a garden.

"Well, yes, it does belong to me. It's part of the property, but having said that, I have to point out that it's not fenced off, it's easily accessible."

"Pity."

"Oh?"

"Well, I'm thinking that if the skull had been found in the grounds of the house we may have been able to link it to the occupants of the house, whoever they were, at the time the person was killed and buried in a shallow grave. The fact that the wood is easily accessed means that we may not be able to link the body to the house."

"I see." Grant glanced at his watch.

"Am I keeping you?"

"No, not at all. I'm expecting a reporter from the *Glasgow Herald* any minute."

"You haven't phoned the press about this?"

Grant smiled. "No. I didn't come up the Clyde on a banana boat. Give me some credit. No, it's a features reporter; they want to do a piece about me. You know, local boy makes good. I left Glasgow

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when I was sixteen, went to London. Be easier to say what I didn't do rather than what I did. Slept rough in the early days, cleaned public toilets, often nearly gave up, but I was too proud to return to Glasgow as a defeated person. That sort of pride is destructive. But stay I did, began to accumulate a little money, and then really made it over the last few years when they deregulated the stock market and any guy could walk off the street and establish himself as a broker. Which is what I did. I went for the burn, and when I'd made the magic million, I threw in the towel."

"I don't blame you."

"Look, I suffered for it, every day, twelve hours a day, no rest, no social life. But anyway, I did it. I've come back to Scotland and the *Glasgow Herald* want to do something on me. Have my photograph in the paper for the first time in my life."

"I'll look out for the article."

"I don't know if it's relevant to the investigation, but there's signs of people having been living rough in the house, empty tin cans and bottles, about ten years old going by the sell-by dates, at least the ones I can read. So whoever it was entered the house shortly after it was vacated. It may have been nothing more than a poor old tramp doing a bit of skippering before moving on. I mention it because it may be significant. But if you don't mind, I'll go back inside and wait for the reporter."

Sussock walked across the garden of shoulder-high grass to the gate and the entrance to the wood. Police dogs crisscrossed the area, police officers with staves beat down the stands of weed and bramble. Sergeant Piper approached Sussock. "Just one set of bones, sir."

"Just one."

"It's enough, I dare say."

"Dare say it's one set too many."

"Shallowly buried, but looks like they've been down there a few years to me, an untrained eye."

"Untrained, but not inexperienced, Sergeant. But we'll allow the pathologist to tell us what is and what is not."

Sussock turned and walked back to the house, to his car, to return to P Division police station. He walked round the side of the house to the front and glanced through the broken windows of one room where he saw Michael Grant sitting on a white-painted metal garden chair in a room of bare floorboards and faded green wallpaper. Two other people were in the room with him; one was standing, draped with cameras. Sitting in another garden chair, writing on a notepad, was an attractive woman in her thirties, smart in a pinstripe suit, with a fiery explosion of striking carrot-red hair.

TUESDAY

Reynolds lowered himself into his chair in his small office in the bowels of the Glasgow Royal Infirmary. He glanced at the report,

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winced at the typing errors, marking each one as he encountered it, and then picked up the phone and dialed an internal number. "Hello, Reynolds here in Pathology. Can you get me P Division police station at Charing Cross, please? Thanks." He then replaced the receiver and waited. In the old days he would have dialed direct, but the National Health Service had become cost conscious and was taking steps to prevent employees making private phone calls. And this Reynolds could be sympathetic towards—*anything*, anything to save Britain's beloved National Health Service was welcome in his view. What he found more difficult to be sympathetic towards was the extra layer of management which had been created, which was not needed and which cost millions. That and the criminally inflated price of the recently installed computer system made the loss of private use of the phones more difficult to accept. It was what his late father would have described as being "penny wise and pound foolish." But if the Mandarins want it, the Mandarins get it. His phone rang. He picked it up and said, "Reynolds here."

"P Division at Charing Cross," said a female voice.

"DI Donoghue, CID, please." Reynolds held the phone as the line clicked.

"Donoghue." A crisp, efficient voice.

"Reynolds, G.R.I."

"Good afternoon."

"I thought that you might like the nuts and bolts of my findings in respect of the skeletal remains that were brought in yesterday."

"You've been very quick."

"I've also been incomplete, I'm afraid. The findings are limited. I've also been delayed by Noreen; she was a little the worse for wear when she turned up for work this A.M. She was her usual late self and, as usual, spent the first hour pouring black stuff down her neck to compensate for all the colourless stuff she clearly poured down her neck last night. She hammered her way through the report, littering it with typing errors, also down to her head splitting asunder, no doubt . . . but . . . well, it's a male skeleton, adult, but at the early end of adulthood, someone in his twenties. The skull hasn't properly knitted and there's limited ossification of the joints. He's had a little dental work, but his teeth are in bad shape. He led a self-neglecting lifestyle and possibly comes from a low socioeconomic group. Dental care is a middle-class phenomenon, upper working class as well . . . I mean it is, it just is."

"It is," Donoghue agreed. "I won't argue with that."

"He was West European."

"You can tell that from a skeleton?"

"Oh yes, Caucasian skeletons are similar to Asian skeletons but you can still tell the difference and both are very different from Afro-Caribbean skeletons. He was a wee guy, just five feet tall."

"Cause of death?"

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"Difficult to tell. The skeleton has multiple fractures, the skull is massively fractured, as are his ribs, arms, and legs, but I can't say he was battered to death because he could have been deceased when those injuries were sustained. You see, with only the skeleton to work with, I can't rule out the possibility that he was stabbed or strangled to death."

"Understood, but his body got a fair wee battering, though."

"Certainly did, and the fractures are radial, not linear, indicating ye famous blunt instrument, a ball hammer not a stave, for example. I can rule out poisoning with heavy poison such as arsenic and cyanide because that would remain in the long bones, but mild poisons would not leave a trace. He could have OD'd on heroin, for example."

"When?"

"I knew you were going to ask me that, and I don't know how helpful I can be, but I certainly think years. The remains are completely skeletalised, no flesh at all remaining, and the clothing has deteriorated to nothing, but it was buried in wet soil so deterioration would have been rapid. But still, think in years."

"So we trawl our missing-person files for a twenty-something male of five feet in stature. Should take us about a year," said Donoghue good-humouredly.

"An hour or two, I should think, with your magic box. Not many five-foot-tall men, that's short even for the west of Scotland. We are noted for many things, but the height of our natives is not one of them. What I suggest is that I remove the jaw and send the lower dentures to the dental hospital. If you come up with a short list of names, the dental hospital will check the jaw with the dental records, which will confirm or otherwise his identity. Dental records are as individual as fingerprints or DNA."

"I think I'll do that," Donoghue said. "I'll also prepare a press release. Announcing the discovery might panic someone into giving up a guilty secret."

"I'll fax this to you as soon as Noreen retypes it."

WEDNESDAY

Donoghue had to concede that Dr. Reynolds was correct. The short stature of the deceased massively reduced the number of possible missing persons of which he might be one. It reduced it to three. By Wednesday afternoon, at the end of their working day, the dental hospital phoned Donoghue with the information that the lower dentures matched the dental records of one Robert Black, whose date of birth would make him thirty years old if he were alive at the present time. His given address was 127 Skerryvore Road, Cranhill.

THURSDAY

The woman sat and stared blankly at Ray Sussock, who had sat, as invited, on the sofa. He read the threadbare room: worn carpet, com-

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bustibles accumulated in the fire grate, and a picture of the monarch on the wall. It had often surprised Sussock that the poorest people seem to be the most loyal to the Crown, as if losing themselves in some grand soap opera. The woman was frail and pale, perhaps, pondered Sussock, perhaps from an internal growth. She smoked heavily, the air was thick with smoke, the ceiling was yellow with nicotine stains. Sussock glanced outside at the houses on the other side of Skerryvore Road: four-storey tenement style, brick, built shortly after 1945, now grimy and sprouting satellite dishes on the walls, growing like a profusion of mushrooms above unkempt gardens. The woman lit a cigarette, fumbling with a lighter in arthritic hands. Sussock winced. He had been a smoker in his younger days and now he paid the penalty, fearing the thin air of winter, which tortured his lungs, stabbing at his chest. For him, the advert for the sports car which read "goes like a Scottish summer, grips like a Scottish winter" had special significance. Summers were too short, winters overly long. Now it was July, but in this smoke-filled room his lungs hurt as much as they did on a cold morning in February.

"You know, sir, I'm glad. No, I mean, I'm no glad he's dead, I'm glad I know. All these years I wondered what had happened to our Robert, now I know." The woman pulled on the cigarette. "Aye, see, sir, I'm ending my own days soon, and the only thing I ever prayed to God for was to know what happened to our Robert before I die. Now I know."

"Still, I'm sorry." Sussock tried to breathe shallowly. It didn't help. The pain penetrated his chest like a skewer.

"See, I knew, as only a mother can know. One day I woke up and knew that I wouldn't see Robert again. Now I feel a weight has been lifted from my shoulders. Now I can see him buried with a headstone. His poor dad went not knowing what had happened to him, but he believed him to be alive somewhere, but see, me, see me, I knew he was dead, as only a mother can know. I went to a séance but I couldn't contact him, the medium couldn't contact him, then I went to a spiritualist but I was out of luck there, too. But I knew he was in the clay somewhere."

"When did you last see your son, Mrs. Black?" Sussock tried breathing through his nose. That didn't help either.

"Ten years ago, about; no, exactly. Ten years ago come October." She blanked off as if reliving a memory. "Aye, I see him now, walking out of the door with a bag. He was off, see; he'd been at home since he was a wean and he was off. Do you know how he died, sir?"

"We don't. I have to advise you that it was his skeletal remains that were found. He was identified by his dental records."

"Oh, to God." Mrs. Black shook her head. "Mind, his soul is the thing, what happens to his body is not what matters. Do you know when he died, if you don't ken how?"

"Not exactly, but a matter of years ago."

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"It would be. It wasn't long after he left home that day that he stopped contacting us. He'd no lose contact. When he stopped calling round, then we knew something was wrong." Sussock asked where Robert had been living.

"I don't know, to be honest, sir."

"Any friends?"

"Just the one. I didn't take to him, but our Robert was twenty, he was grown. He'd teamed up with a ned from the next street, a guy called Kydd, 'y' and double 'd.' He was known as 'Psycho Billy the Kydd' and for good reason, he was a violent wee guy. I didn't take to him at all, so I didn't, not at all. They Kydds are a bad family, well kent to the polis, so they are. I don't know their house number but they stay on Bellrock Street, but they're well kent, you'll have a record of them."

Sussock left the house of Black and returned to his car. People eyed him with distaste. Cops are not well liked in the east-end schemes. He radioed Control and asked for a criminal-records check, name of Kydd, William, a.k.a. "Psycho Billy," believed to be of Bellrock Street, Cranhill, G34. Exact house number, please. He replaced the microphone and sat back in the seat, awaiting Control's response. Children played on a piece of open ground, an orange-coloured double decker bus negotiated the narrow street, a few parked cars, a few people walking. Cranhill.

Control returned his call. The street number he required was 162. He thanked Control. He walked the short distance to 162 Bellrock Street. It had a controlled entry. He pressed the silver button against the name Kydd and heard a buzzing sound.

"Aye?" came a quick reply.

"Police," said Sussock.

"What's it about?"

"Just a few questions, there's no trouble." A pause, and then a louder buzzer sounded as the lock electronically opened. Sussock pushed the street door open and stepped into a clean close that smelled of bleach.

Sussock saw why the Kydds were "well kent." The house was neat, fastidiously so, and well appointed: deep-pile, fitted carpets; leather-bound furniture; top-of-the-range hi-fi equipment—and all, the Kydds would no doubt insist, had been paid for out of their welfare benefits. Either that, thought Sussock, or else they would say it had all been "given" in exchange for "favours." It was Mrs. Kydd who spoke to Sussock, who answered his questions. Mr. Kydd was a slender, stern-faced man in his sixties who sat in the chair which was placed directly opposite the huge TV screen. Sussock had seen such large television screens before, but never in a house, only in pubs. Mr. Kydd eyed Sussock without blinking and without saying anything.

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"He's not been in any trouble for a few years now," Mrs. Kydd beamed proudly when Sussock told her he was seeking information from her son Billy.

"I'm pleased to hear it, and he may not be in trouble now."

"He's got married, has a couple of children, settled down, got a steady job with the council. He did a few wild things when he was younger, but now he's a family man and he's taking his responsibilities seriously. He stays in Garthamlock. What information do you want from him?"

"It's about a laddie called Robert Black."

"Robert, wee Robert Black from Skerryvore?"

"Aye."

"See, it's been a good wee while since I heard that name, so it has. So that's what it's about. We heard on the TV that he'd been found."

"His skeleton has been found. All we're doing is tracing his last known steps and his last associates, and we knew he used to associate with Billy. So we'd like to chat to Billy."

"Aye, so he did, ten years ago they were in the same team. See, there was that lassie, Hamilton, Jody Hamilton, she's a married woman now, her married name's Ovette. She's got two children. She stays here in Cranhill, so she does." Sussock scribbled on his notepad.

"And there was Gatiss, Carl Gatiss. I didn't like him, haven't heard of him for a wee while. I suppose he's settled down, we all do. I did a few daft things when I was a lassie, but I settled down."

"Carl Gatiss. Do you know where he lives?"

"I couldn't tell you, sir."

"Any other names you remember?"

Mr. Kydd cleared his throat and Mrs. Kydd shook her head and said no, no more names.

"So where does Billy live now?"

The woman paused.

"Let me put it to you this way, Mrs. Kydd. When your son was last in trouble with the police, was he living at his present address?"

"Aye, he was. But it was only a Breach of the Peace."

"So if you don't tell me, all I have to do is radio to the police station and ask for a computer check, and it'll give me your son's present address. It'll delay me for about ten minutes, although I may not want to see him today anyway." The woman glanced at her husband, who nodded. The woman gave an address in Garthamlock.

Sussock returned to the city centre, to Charing Cross, to P Division police station. He spoke to the collator, who pressed buttons on the computer keyboard and promised Sussock he'd recover the files from the void and have them sent up to him. Sussock went to his room, made a mug of coffee, sat at his desk. A fresh-faced, eager-to-please cadet tapped on his door and entered carrying four dusty files. Sus-

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sock read them, each one, and together he saw that they comprised a nest of vipers. He also noted, with no little amusement, that the interested CID officer at the time was one Detective Sergeant Donoghue.

"It's a nest of vipers, sir." After the formalities Sussock sat, as invited, in front of Donoghue's desk in Donoghue's smoke-filled office. His lungs began to hurt the instant he stepped into the room.

"Oh?" Donoghue took his pipe from his mouth.

"Aye." Sussock patted the files. "It'll be a trip down memory lane for you, sir."

"Tell me."

"Some years ago now, when you were a detective sergeant."

"That's going back."

"Ten years to be exact, sir. Do the names Kydd—a.k.a. 'Psycho Billy'—Gatiss, Black . . ."

"That Robert Black." Donoghue relaxed in his chair. "I'm getting old, Ray."

"Not as old as I am, sir."

"The grey matter just doesn't function as it used to function. I just didn't make the connection. So it was his remains the Doberman found. Well, well . . . but I've noticed this: the so-called 'crime pond,' all the villains swim in the same pond and we keep catching the same ones again and again, or at least the same names keep reoccurring, as in the case of Robert Black. He was, as I recall, an essentially harmless wee ned; his problem, as I further recall, was that he was mixing with the wrong crowd. He was a follower and his mistake was that he followed 'bad' rather than 'good.' Gatiss and Kydd were in a different league; two very heavy, very nasty pieces of work. We pulled them for a series of minor offences, but we knew they were doing major stuff. I remember taking Robert to one side and saying, 'Look, Robert, you know the saying and it applies to you: If you fly with the crows you'll be shot with the crows.'"

"Did he listen?"

"Nope. Still ran with Gatiss and Kydd and a couple of lassies, as I remember."

"Jody Hamilton, now Jody Ovette, with two children. 'Billy the Kydd' also has a family and has settled, according to his mum."

"According to his mum." Donoghue smiled. "You see, if I know the Kydds, unless they've all found religion, that will be wishful thinking on the part of Mrs. Kydd. Billy the Kydd may well be married with a family, but I have my doubts about him settled, he's a leopard that won't change his spots too easily. There was another girl too, wasn't there?"

"Sharon Davies."

"That's her."

"She's cross-referred and her file's here."

Donoghue put his pipe back in his mouth and lit it with his gold-

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plated lighter. "Now, as I recall, they were known for petty offences but we suspected them of supplying drugs and then we had occasion to quiz them about the death of an English boy. A young fellow, can't remember his name. Can I have the Kydd's file . . . ?" Sussock selected Kydd's file and handed it to Donoghue, who took it and leafed through the pages. "Takes me back. It's like reading an old diary, my handwriting has changed . . . yes, here it is, 'interviewed in connection with the death of Sydney Copeland,' that was his name. You could dig out the Copeland file from the void, but the essential story is that Copeland and his girlfriend came to Glasgow with a bag full of amphetamines; Copeland was known to the Birmingham police as a carrier. They were met and taken to the Red Road flats. In the flats the girl became suspicious and left, saying she wanted some cigarettes. She waited for Copeland at the station. When he didn't turn up she returned alone to Birmingham, by which time Copeland's body had been found at the bottom of Red Road flats. He'd fallen or been pushed, but either way, he'd met his maker. We had the girl brought back to Scotland, to Glasgow. She identified Kydd and Gatiss as being the ones who'd met her and Copeland at the station and taken them to the flats. Gatiss and Kydd also had a supply of amphetamines identified as probably being the consignment that Copeland had carried from Birmingham, and so we quizzed them about Copeland's death. They didn't break, and we had no evidence, no witnesses, so we had to let them go."

"What happened then, as I recall, is that they went to ground, the whole gang, your nest of vipers, just disappeared. They left the town and further increased our suspicions. We'd probably got closer than we realised, but things moved on, other murders occurred, and a month later, when they were noticed in the city again, they were noticed to be individuals, not a team anymore, and the still-open Copeland file was consigned to the void. So it now appears that Robert Black met his maker at the same time, roughly, as Sydney Copeland met his."

"And Gatiss and Kydd were associated with both."

"Has got a certain odour, hasn't it, Ray?"

"Not unlike rotting flesh, sir."

"I think if I were you, Ray, I'd go about this obliquely. Don't go directly for Gatiss and Kydd, they're hard; they were hard then and they'll be hard now, despite what Mrs. Kydd says about her son settling down and becoming a family man. I'd be inclined to seek out the girls, Jody Ovette, nee Hamilton, and Sharon Davies. They were more sensitive and if they've become parents they'll be appreciative of Mrs. Black's need to know what happened to Robert. They may each have a conscience pricking them, but I doubt if Gatiss and Kydd will."

Sussock glanced at the clock on Donoghue's wall. Two P.M. "Dare say it can wait until tomorrow. I'd like to finish on time, if you don't mind,

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sir." He stood, pleased to be leaving the smog of Donoghue's office. "It's been ten years, and one more day won't make a deal of difference."

Ray Sussock returned home to his bedsit, a flat in a large house where he shared the bathroom and the kitchen. His room had space enough only for a bed and an upright chair and desk. This was how he lived, as a cop, aged sixty, pending his divorce and the sale of his erstwhile marital home. His room was too cramped to spend any time in unless he was sleeping. He spent the remainder of the afternoon sitting in the library, then he ate at a cafe, then drank alone in a pub, standing at the bar until nine. Then he returned to his bed and slept, pleased that he would have to be at work at six A.M.

FRIDAY

"I can't tell you how relieved I am that you called." Judy Ovette sat in the only chair in the living room of her house. Sussock sat on the settee. She may well, he thought, have run wild ten years ago, a drug-pusher's moll, probably popping pills herself, but people changed, and clearly Jody Ovette had changed more than her name. She now came across as a responsible young woman in her thirties. Pictures of two happy, smiling children on the mantelpiece of her living room, which she kept neat and clean. A crucifix stood between her children and another hung round her neck. "Once a Catholic, always a Catholic; that's what they say, and it's true. I've returned to the church and the murders have haunted me. I've spoken to the father about them, made confession in the confessional and spoken to him in person, and he felt that I should go to the police and make a statement. He offered to accompany me. I knew he was right, and I knew that one day I would, but it's a big thing, grassing on your mates, or ex-mates, especially when you know they'll go down for life. I mean, it's not going to bring wee Robert or that English boy back, is it? And it was ten years ago."

"It would be justice being done. You owe it to Robert and the English lad, and you owe it to their parents. You're a parent yourself now, you'll be able to see that."

"Aye." She glanced at the photographs of her children. "I know where my duty lies."

"The sooner you do your duty, the sooner we can stop anybody else becoming a victim of Gatiss and Kydd."

"Aye, that's true. They don't call him 'Psycho Billy' for nothing."

"We'll need more than your statement. It's not likely that Gatiss or Kydd will confess."

"Sharon will give you a statement."

"That would be Sharon Davies?"

"Aye, except that she's Sharon Holmes now. One child, another on the way. Married to a firefighter. They're buying their house. She did well with him. He's a good guy. I lost contact with Gatiss and Kydd. I

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know they've kept out of major trouble, otherwise I would have read it in the papers."

"Some petty crime, but as always, that's only what we know or have been able to prove."

"But Sharon will give you a statement."

"So what happened?"

"Lord, dear God, it was such a waste. . . ." She shook her head. "See, Gatiss and Kydd filled in the English boy, they launched him from the fifteenth floor of the block of flats—took his pills, hundreds of amphetamines, and rather than paying him, dropped him out of the window. They would have done the same to his girl but she left the flat. Robert said she got suspicious and left to buy some cigarettes. She saved her life."

"You were not there?"

"No. Just wee Robert, Gatiss, and Kydd. Gatiss and Kydd did the pushing."

"I see."

"So anyway, the police started leaning on them after the English girl gave their names to the police and identified them, but there were no witnesses. The police couldn't find Robert; he was running scared and hiding, and the English girl didn't know his name anyway. The police let Gatiss and Kydd go for lack of evidence and we left town, me and Sharon and wee Robert and Gatiss and Kydd. We looked for somewhere to squat, and we found this big house out by Kilsyth and lived there for a few weeks. It was summer, and we had sleeping bags. Really quiet after the city, the fresh air . . . but wee Robert cracked . . . he just broke. . . . One day, we were outside in the garden and he just started to panic, seeing Gatiss and Kydd push that English boy to his death, calm as they pleased. Kydd hit wee Robert over the head with a hammer. He must have been carrying it because it appeared from nowhere, and he just kept on hitting him. Then he gave the hammer to Gatiss, who did the same. They did that and kept on doing it long after he'd stopped moving."

"Then they buried him?"

"They waited until the night to do that. Got some spades from the outbuildings and dug a hole in a wood behind the house. Gatiss pushed the hammer into a hedge near the outbuildings. It'll still be there. It was a hawthorn hedge and he pushed it well in. What'll happen now?"

"We'll get that down in the form of a statement, get you to sign it, then I'll go and visit Sharon Holmes, and if she proves to be as cooperative as you believe she'll be, we'll tap on the doors of the houses of Kydd and Gatiss."

"We never get away with anything, do we?"

"Not often." Sussock reached for the statement forms from his briefcase. "The law has a long arm and it reaches vastly over time and space."

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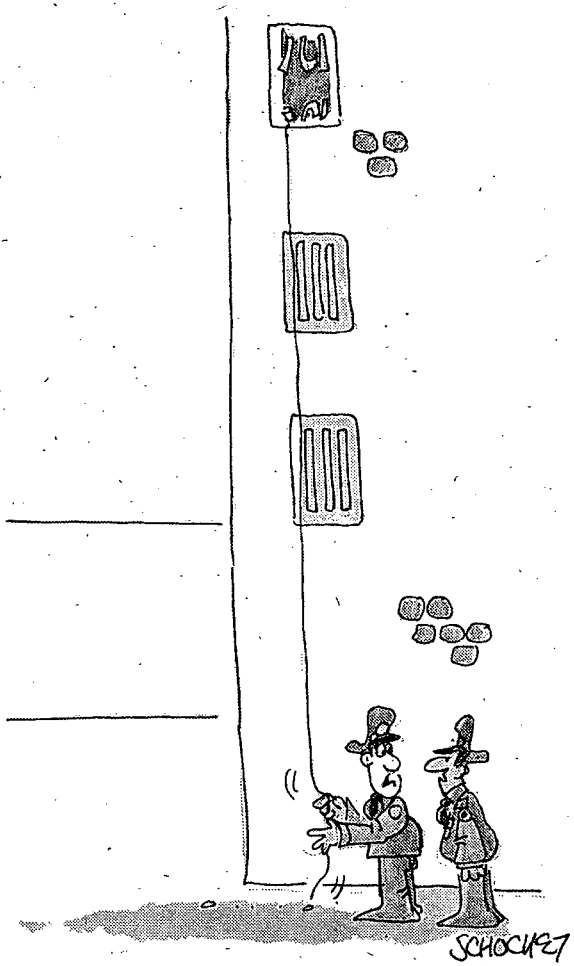
"Aye, but I was thinking that if the authorities don't get you, your conscience will."

"Your conscience might. Strikes me the likes of Gatiss and Kydd and others of their ilk can only be nailed by the law."

Sussock, being in possession of full statements from Jody Ovette and Sharon Holmes, returned to Barfillon House to seek permission from Michael Grant for the police to probe his hawthorn hedges for the murder weapon. As he approached the front door of the house he glanced in at the rooms as he passed. In one room he saw Michael Grant in overalls, stripping wallpaper. Someone was with him, also in overalls, also stripping wallpaper, a woman in her thirties. Sussock had seen her before somewhere, dressed differently, but definitely the same woman. There was just no forgetting that head of striking carrot-red hair. ●



"IT'S DENTAL FLOSS."

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Best Behaviour

by Simon Brett

Not one, not two, but three! nominations for best short story of 1997 went to Simon Brett. Fans will find his Edgar and Anthony Award nominated "Ways to Kill A Cat" in *Malice Domestic 6* (Pocket), and his Agatha Award nominated "Heavenly Bodies" in *Funny Bones* (Signet). He also has two new novels: *Dead Room Farce* (St. Martin's) and *Mrs. Pargeter's Point of Honour* (Scribners). ¶

I know how to behave. I do. That's one thing my papa taught me. It's really the most important thing he left me with—knowing the right way to behave.

And I never thought it was cruel. He had my best interests at heart. I know he did. If there was any cruelty involved, then he was only being cruel to be kind. He often used that expression. "Edmund," he'd say, "I'm only being cruel to be kind." And I respected that. Even though the things he did sometimes hurt, I could still respect his reasons for doing them.

It's a matter of justice, you see. Being fair to people. Not just being fair to yourself—that could so easily become selfishness—but being fair to everyone else you come into contact with. "We're social beings," Papa would say. "Humankind're social beings, and one's success as a member of humankind is demonstrated by how well one relates to other human beings. You have to behave, Edmund. Never knowingly do harm to another member of the human race."

Those were the values Papa dinned into me from a very early age and, from the time I could understand what he was talking about, I very quickly came to respect what he stood for.

He was entirely consistent, you see. His rules were clear. He never punished me for something that I didn't know at the time—or at least understood pretty soon afterwards—was wrong. "Bad behaviour must never go unpunished," Papa used to say. "Otherwise it's bound to lead to worse behaviour."

He didn't have any truck with the view that, equally, good behaviour should be rewarded. "Good behaviour should be instinctive. Good behaviour brings its own reward. Though, in fact, for you, Edmund, good behaviour is not good enough. Any son of mine must always be on his *best* behaviour."

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So that's what I always aspired to. And, most of the time, achieved. When I fell short of Papa's high standards— no, of *my* high standards ("It's within *you,* Edmund," he always used to say. "It should be instinctive within yourself.")— then I knew punishment was inevitable. But it was perfectly fair. I knew the rules. I'd broken them. I had failed as a member of humankind.

Papa himself avoided doing unwitting harm to other members of the human race by not having a lot to do with them. We didn't see many other people as I was growing up. There was just Papa, Mama, and me. "We don't need other people," Papa used to say. "We're self-sufficient. We are fortunate— unlike a lot of the poor bastards out there— to be a secure, loving family unit."

And he was right— we were fortunate. Money was never a problem— we always had enough to eat, we lived in a nice house, I was sent to a private school. It was all very nice.

And I'm proud to say, Mama and Papa never had any of the problems with me that you read about other families having with growing children. They were never going to see my name in the papers . . . well, that is, until this current business. And now they're both dead, so it's not as if any amount of cruel lies in the tabloids can cause them any anxiety. Not now. Not anymore.

My father's teaching stood me in good stead, though, you know. I didn't backslide after he died. No, the training Papa had given me was so good that Mama never had to raise her voice to me. I was permanently on my best behaviour.

But I don't want to sound like I'm a goody-goody, not to give that impression, no. I do have my . . . I was about to say "vices," but I think vice is probably too strong a word. Vice means doing things to other people, body things, things with your secret bits. And I've never felt the urge to do any of that, don't understand why people make such a fuss about it. No, for what I do, "indulgences" is the word I prefer. Yes, I do have indulgences.

There are only two, really. Two big ones. They're hot buttered toast with Golden Syrup on, and Children's BBC. And, well, actually, now I come to think of it, there is sort of a third. My parents always hated the idea of my name being shortened, but now I tell people to call me not "Edmund" but "Eddie."

All right, you could say I'm reacting, greedily taking the things I wasn't allowed when I was a child, but I don't think mine're too bad, as indulgences go. Other people do a lot worse things.

And by Papa's rules— you know, about not doing harm to another member of humankind— well, I can't honestly think that my indulgences harm anyone. No matter how much Children's BBC I watch and video, no matter how much hot buttered toast with Golden Syrup I eat, nobody else gets hurt by it.

Mind you, the Golden Syrup does make me fat. I was always big— used to get rather unkind things said about my size when I was at

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school—but since Mama died, I have got a lot bigger. She used to keep an eye on how much Golden Syrup I ate, used to say, "Hold back, Edmund, enough is enough, you know," but since she died . . . well, there's no one to stop me. But like I said, nobody gets hurt by it.

I'm lucky. I know I'm lucky. My parents left me enough money so that I won't ever have to work. Probably that's just as well, because the few interviews I did have for jobs didn't turn out very well. I think my size put the people off, partly, and then they did seem to ask very difficult questions. I admit there are a lot of things I don't know about, and the subjects on which I am good . . . like Children's BBC . . . well, they didn't ask about them. The experience rather put me off applying for other jobs.

But I'm lucky too, in that I have friends. Not that many, but there are some children round where I live and I get on well with them. They know about Children's BBC, you see, so we've got things to talk about. I often meet them in the park, near the children's playground. I'm too big to go on any of the swings or anything . . . I'd probably break them if I did, I'm such a big lump . . . but it's a good place to meet the children.

I get on better with them when they're on their own. I buy sweets for them. Never go out without a couple of bags of Jelly Babies in my pockets. The children like those. (So do I, actually!) But I only give them sweets when they're on their own. Their parents don't seem to like the children talking to me. Sometimes they say rather cruel things. Things that wouldn't pass muster under Papa's rules. I'm another member of humankind, and the things they say do do harm to me. What's more, I think they do it knowingly.

Still, in the park I do quite often see children on their own, so it's not all bad. I tell them to call me "Eddie." I like it when I hear their little voices call me Eddie. Of course, the children get bigger and seem to lose interest in talking about Children's BBC with me. But there's always another lot of little ones growing up.

I've got so many children's programmes videoed that I sometimes think I should ask some of the children to come back home with me to have a good watch and lashings of hot buttered toast with Golden Syrup. But I haven't done that yet. I don't know why, but something told me it was a bad idea.

And now, after some of the questions I've been asked in the last few months, I know my instinct was right. It would have been a very bad idea.

My problems . . . yes, I suppose I have to call them problems . . . began in relation to a little girl called Bethany Jones. I didn't know her second name when I met her. She just told me she was called "Bethany." But recently her name's been so much over the newspapers and the television that everyone in the country knows she's called Bethany Jones.

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I met her in the park, like the other children. She was six—just been six, just had her sixth birthday party, she was very proud of that. She lived quite near the park, over the other side from my house. Her parents didn't like her going to the children's playground on her own, but she was so close she used to sneak out when they weren't looking.

That's when I'd meet her. And we'd talk about Children's BBC. She didn't call me Eddie. She used to call me "Fat Boy," which I suppose could have been cruel, but I didn't mind it from Bethany. She didn't mean any harm. That's what they said in the papers. Her mother said, "Bethany never did any harm to anyone."

I didn't know what had happened to Bethany before the police arrived. I don't have a paper or watch the news—well, except for *Newsround* on Children's BBC. And that's on at five, and she wasn't found till four-thirty, so they'd have been hard put to get it on that day's programme. Anyway, *Newsround* wouldn't have covered a story like Bethany Jones. It was too unpleasant for a children's audience.

The police arrived very quickly. Children's BBC had just ended, at five thirty-five, as usual, and *Neighbours* had just started. Sometimes I watch *Neighbours* and sometimes I don't. It's not proper Children's BBC, though I know a lot of children watch it. For me, I'll watch it if I like the story. If there's too much kissing and that sort of thing, I'll switch it off. I don't like stories with kissing in them. I never saw Papa and Mama kiss, and the thought of people doing it sort of like in public, on the television . . . well, I don't think it's very nice.

The day the police arrived, there wasn't a kissing story in *Neighbours* and I was watching it. And videoing it, obviously. I video everything I watch. I had to switch off the television when the police came in. But I left the video running.

The first thing the police asked me was if I knew Bethany and I said, yes, of course I did. And they said they'd been talking to some of the other children and was I the "Eddie" who used to give them Jelly Babies, and I said, yes, I was.

There was one of them, the policemen, who seemed to be in charge. He was not wearing a uniform and he was very forceful. Detective Inspector Bracken, he was called. Not the sort of person you'd argue with. He reminded me of Papa, and in the same way that I'd never have contradicted Papa, I found it difficult to stand up to this man and say he was wrong, even when the suggestions he was making were absolutely untrue. It seemed rather rude for me to disagree with him.

"And did you ever give Jelly Babies to Bethany?" Detective Inspector Bracken demanded.

"Yes," I said. "Of course I did. I like Bethany. She's one of my friends."

"So she was one of your friends, was she?"

"*Is* one of my friends," I said. "*Is* one of my friends."

Detective Inspector Bracken looked at me thoughtfully. But his expression wasn't just thoughtful. There was something else in it too, something that almost looked like distaste. He kept on looking at me.

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I suddenly remembered that the police were guests in my house and I hadn't even offered them anything. ("Black mark, Edmund," Papa would have said. "Black mark on the hospitality front.") "Could I get you some tea or something?" I asked. "Something to eat, perhaps? I often have buttered toast with Golden Syrup round this time. Maybe you'd like—?"

"No, thank you," said Detective Inspector Bracken. And he kept on looking straight at me. I found it embarrassing. I tried not to look him in the face.

"So . . ." he said, after what seemed a long silence, ". . . have you always had this urge to hang round little girls?"

He was getting the wrong end of the stick. I had to explain it to him. "It's not just little girls," I said. "It's little boys, too."

"Is it?" he said. "Really?" And somehow he didn't say it in a kind way. Then he went on, "Can you tell us what's happened to Bethany Jones?"

"Happened to her? Why should I be able to tell you?"

"I just thought you might be able to." Detective Inspector Bracken was looking at me in the way Papa used to look when I'd done something wrong and he was just waiting for me to own up to it. I always did own up; Papa knew he only had to wait. But with Detective Inspector Bracken it was different. There was nothing for me to own up to.

"Save us the trouble of doing it," he went on after a silence. "Save us the trouble of telling you what's happened to Bethany Jones."

And then he did tell me what had happened to her. It was horrid. I don't like things like that. It's like kissing, and people's secret bits . . . I don't like it.

Apparently she'd been attacked in the park by someone. She'd been dragged off into the bushes by the children's playground. Then she'd been "sexually assaulted." And then she'd been beaten on the head with a stone until she was dead.

"Bethany—dead?" I said in disbelief. "But I was talking to her only yesterday."

"Yesterday," Detective Inspector Bracken repeated. "Were you? And what about today?"

"No, I didn't see her today."

"Where were you, Mr. Bowman," asked Detective Inspector Bracken, "between three-thirty and four-thirty this afternoon?"

I smiled at the question. Anyone who knew me at all—and granted there weren't that many people who did know me—but anyone who knew anything about me would know the answer to that. I was where I am every weekday afternoon at that time.

"I was here," I replied. "Here watching Children's BBC. I always am. Go on, I can prove it. You ask me any questions you like about this afternoon's Children's BBC. I bet I can give you the right answers."

Detective Inspector Bracken smiled wryly and looked across at my video recorder. "Yes, I'm sure you can, Mr. Bowman. Pretty unusual

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habit for a grown man, I'd have thought, videoing children's television programmes. . . ."

"Oh, but I like to have a full record," I told him. "I feel awful if I think I've missed a single minute of Children's BBC."

"I see," he said. But he didn't look at me as if he did see. Soon after that, he said he wanted me to accompany him and the others to the police station. ". . . if I didn't mind . . ." No, I said, I didn't mind. I knew it didn't do to be difficult with forceful people like Detective Inspector Bracken. Best behaviour, Edmund, best behaviour.

They kept explaining things to me. They kept stopping and checking that I understood what was going on. Then, after I was charged, they got a lawyer for me, and she kept explaining things too. And yes, I did understand. I understood the words and I understood what they meant. What I didn't understand was how they could manage to get it all so wrong.

I think a lot of the trouble was Detective Inspector Bracken. His manner, the way he put things, was so like Papa's that . . . well, I still found it very difficult to argue with him. He'd say something which was complete nonsense and I'd . . . well, I'd try to point out, sort of, why what he was saying wasn't true, but somehow my words didn't come out right.

I felt very trapped. I wanted to get back to my house, put on a video of some old *Tom and Jerry* or something like that, and let it wash all the horrid thoughts and images out of my mind. But they wouldn't let me do that.

I felt very lonely, too. Although there were always people around—indeed, they wouldn't leave me on my own for a second—none of them were friendly. They all looked at me as if I was carrying some awful infectious disease. I wanted someone there who'd just talk to me in a relaxed, simple way. I'd've loved to have one of the children from the park there to talk to. At one moment, when I was particularly stressed, I said that to Detective Inspector Bracken. He gave me a very strange look.

The lawyer they got me—there was no way I could have got one for myself, I've never had any cause to need a lawyer—was, I'm sure, fine, but she didn't seem very interested in my case. Maybe it was just a job of work for her. She didn't seem concerned about putting my side of things. But maybe that wasn't what she was there for. Certainly she didn't stand up to Detective Inspector Bracken much. He was so strong, so dominant, so like Papa.

It was the same at the trial. There was this woman barrister who defended me. I've nothing against women. I like women. But I don't think of them as strong. Probably that comes from having grown up with my parents. It was always Papa who was in charge. Mama was a kind of shadowy figure in the background. So I never really expected the judge and the jury to take much notice of my barrister.

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Also I don't think she took the right approach for my defence. She kept saying it wasn't just Bethany Jones who was a victim. I was a victim too. Then she said things that were a bit hurtful. She said just because I was odd, it didn't automatically make me a criminal. She said, yes, I was a sad, rather pathetic figure, somebody who didn't fit society's norms. But that didn't make me a murderer.

I'm not sure that was the right way to go about it. Calling me "odd" and "sad" and "pathetic" made me seem as if I was all those things. I thought she was playing into the hands of the other barrister. He was a man, much more forceful in his manner. He was like Papa, or Detective Inspector Bracken. He spoke in a way that didn't brook argument. I'm not surprised that the jury believed what he said rather than the arguments my barrister put forward. If I'd known nothing about the case and I'd been sitting in that jury box, I'd have done the same.

But of course I did know something about the case. I knew I'd never touched Bethany Jones, never touched any of the children. At the time those dreadful things happened to her, I was in my house watching Children's BBC.

There was another thing I knew too. I knew my secret bits didn't work like men's are supposed to. I knew my body wasn't capable of doing the things that had been done to her body. But I didn't like to mention that. It was a bit embarrassing. Maybe, if I'd had a male barrister . . . But to talk to a woman—any woman—about that kind of thing . . . well, I couldn't ever have done that.

It wasn't nice before the trial, or while the trial was going on. I was kept in this prison. "On remand," they called it. They didn't have any Golden Syrup in the prison. I asked for it, but you couldn't get it. And you weren't allowed to watch Children's BBC.

Also, the other prisoners were horrid to me. They all seemed to take it for granted that I'd done all those things to Bethany Jones. There was more than one occasion when only the intervention of the prison officers stopped something rather unpleasant happening.

After the trial was over, though, and that horrid wrong verdict had been given, the prison officers' attitude seemed to have changed. I was taken back to prison—the remand prison, that is; I was going to another one to serve my sentence—in a van with barred windows. Inside the prison, the guards were leading me back to my cell, I still had handcuffs on, and we were going through one of the corridors, when suddenly this man stood in front of us, blocking our progress.

I'd seen him round the prison before. He wasn't a nice man, very rough. He didn't speak nicely, didn't have good vowels. He was the kind of man Papa would have told me not to mix with. "They're not our sort of people," he'd have said. "You steer clear of them, Edmund."

And it was good advice. If I could have steered clear of him, I would have done. But there was nowhere to go. It was a narrow corridor. The prison officers who were leading me along just drew back

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as the man launched himself at me. He hit me in the stomach first. "Take that, you filthy fat pervert!" he said.

And when I fell down and tried to scramble away from him along the wall, he started kicking me. All over. My stomach, my arms, my legs, even my secret bits. With the handcuffs on, I couldn't protect myself. He kicked my face as well. Two of my teeth were broken. I could taste the blood and feel their jagged edges.

Then he stopped and laughed. "That's just a taster," he said. "A taster for what they'll do to you when you get in the real nick. They don't like nonces in the real nick."

After he'd finished kicking me, the prison officers came and moved him away. But they'd been there all the time, watching. They could have come to my rescue more quickly, I'm sure they could. I hope the prison officers in "the real nick" are a bit more efficient.

They took me to "the real nick" in another van with barred windows. When I was leaving the remand prison, they asked if I wanted a blanket over my head. Why would I want a blanket over my head? I'd had few enough chances to see the outside world in the last few months. I wanted to see everything I could out of the van's windows.

The trouble is, what I did see, when the van emerged from the gates, was a crowd of people. There were photographers, and a lot of women were there too, women probably about the same age as Bethany Jones's mother. But they weren't like women should be. They weren't quiet and well behaved like Mama always was. No, they were shouting and screaming. As the van went slowly through the crowd, they started banging on the sides. Some of them threw things and spat. I saw one face quite close to mine through the window. It was contorted with hatred. It wasn't nice.

The drumming sound they made against the walls of the van stayed with me. It kind of reverberated in my head. And now I've arrived at the new prison, I can hear it again. I've met the governor, I've been through all the entry procedures, and now I'm being led to my cell. The drumming sound comes from all the other prisoners, banging things against the doors of their cells.

I can hear things shouted too. Not nice things. I can hear that word "nonce" that the man in the remand prison used. I wonder what it means.

Still, I'm sure it'll be all right. They may find the person who really did those horrid things to Bethany Jones, and set me free. Or they may reduce the length of my sentence. I've heard they do that for some prisoners. They reduce the sentence "for good behaviour." And I'm going to continue to do what Papa told me. All the time I'm here, I'm going to be on my absolute best behaviour.

I wonder what it'll be like here. I know there are only certain times when you're allowed to watch television in prison. Maybe here Children's BBC is one of those times.

I hope they have Golden Syrup in this prison. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The Mystery of the Debtors' Prison

by Richard Moquist

The Free Masons' Lodge has always been dear to the heart of Benjamin Franklin. From the early days, when Benjamin and several other prominent Philadelphians met to exchange ideas, books, and sociability, Benjamin has counted himself among its numbers. A place where a deist, Protestant, and occasionally an agnostic could gather in friendly, though often heated, discussion. And it is well that all were welcome, for Benjamin also counted himself among the numbers of each group during some period of his life. But as the old guard passed, new lodgers were admitted and the lodge became, as Benjamin put it, "an excuse for tippling and gossip," and he would less often attend the meetings. The year was 1786 and the month December when I called on Uncle Benjamin to discuss an occurrence concerning two fellow lodge members.

Uncle Benjamin was in his study, fitting a long pipe into an opening on the top of a small iron box. He lifted a handle on one side of

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the box and looked inside. "I believe we will be ready to put it to the test today, Wendell." I knew what was in store if I asked the question that was on my mind, so I pulled out my pocket watch. It was nearly thirty minutes before my scheduled rounds; I ventured ahead. "And what, pray tell, is this thing?"

"Ha, ha! Wendell, take a chair and I will tell you of my latest invention."

I sat in a chair near the fireplace and Benjamin stood before me, then cleared his throat like a schoolmaster getting ready for a lecture. "During my electrical experiments, I have noticed that those materials most conducive to the transferring of electricity also are better for the transference of heat. I have placed these in the following order: metal, rock, wood, and the materials used in clothing. This principle can be readily seen." He picked up a piece of cloth and a brass goblet from the table and placed them in my hands. "Which one would you say is colder?"

"The goblet, of course."

"Wrong!" Benjamin's finger raised to the ceiling. "It only appears colder since your warm hand transfers its heat more readily to it. They have both been sitting on that table, one being no nearer the fire than the other, so they must be of equal temperature. By the same token, if placed near the fire, but not near enough to burn the cloth, the metal will appear warmer, as its heat transfers more readily to the hand touching it. This is why clothing keeps the warmth in our bodies and an iron stove loses its warmth to the air. Now, how can we use these principles, Wendell?"

I shrugged and unsuccessfully began to open my mouth in reply.

"You notice I have heavy curtains on my windows in order to keep heat in, and a stove in the corner to warm the air. Why, then, cannot the same ideas be used in heating a carriage? As you know, I rarely travel in the winter because of the uncomfortableness of my coach. I have therefore had shutters and thick curtains placed on the windows, and today the coachmaker will install this miniature Philadelphia stove. I shall ride to the State House in comfort, from hence forward!" Benjamin pushed his spectacles farther up his nose. "But enough of my invention; I see you are impatient to impart your own story."

Richard W. Moquist worked as a pharmacist for a number of years before turning to writing full time. In 1994, a small press in Salt Lake City published a collection of his stories, *The Franklin Mysteries,* in which Benjamin Franklin takes the role of sleuth. Unfortunately, the press went out of business before the book could be distributed. *EQMM* is pleased to make available one of the fine whodunits from that book. ✝

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Benjamin took a seat in his favorite horsehair chair and I pulled mine near it, leaning toward him. "It's just this peculiar thing concerning the debtors' prison; a little puzzle and that's all, but I know how you enjoy such things."

Benjamin leaned forward now, matching my position as though we were a pair of bookends. "Please continue."

"About four months ago a young jeweler's apprentice got himself into a bit of trouble buying and selling jewelry on his own, and ended up in the debtors' prison. Three days later, Roger Apple, who, you will remember, joined our lodge about a year ago, paid on his debts, and the apprentice was released. Mr. Apple claimed he knew the man, and as he was the charitable sort, no one thought it unusual.

"Well, three days ago, a Negro freeman met with some misfortune at Klaren's Market Store. It seems the shopkeeper's wife gave him a line of credit and when her husband found out, he demanded payment, and so the Negro was sent off to the debtors' prison. Now who should come along and set the man free, paying off all his debts?" I paused for a moment to give Benjamin a touch of the drama and to enjoy his interest in my story. "It was none other than Mr. Klaren himself."

"Robert Klaren!" Benjamin cried. "Now that is quite remarkable. Besides being tight with the penny, Klaren is the staunchest antiabolitionist in all of Philadelphia. I've had a few words with him myself on that subject. What reason did he give?"

"That was very odd, too, for he would give no better reasons than Mr. Apple, saying it was the goodwill of the Christmas season."

"This is indeed an interesting little puzzle. Have you found a common link between the prisoners and their benefactors?"

"None, except for the facts that each was freed by a lodge member, and that neither benefactor will adequately explain his reasons." I waited for a moment while Benjamin stared into the fire, then I stood by my chair. "I must be on my way, Uncle Benjamin, but I shall keep you informed of any further developments."

"Yes, yes, please do. If my feelings are correct, we have not heard the last of this affair." Benjamin lifted his fur slippers nearer the fire, reminding himself of his invention. "By the way, Wendell, I will be testing my coach today at six o'clock if you would care to ride along."

I had been taking my quarters in Mrs. Marshall's boardinghouse on Chestnut, only two doors west of the lodge, and was often privy to more than my share of the lodge news, for I dined there nightly. It was among these friends on the next day that I learned that a third resident of the prison, Mr. Charles Tourville, a rogue of the first order and a known countinghouse forger, had been liberated and his debts paid. On this occasion, however, the benefactor was anonymous. Though some speculated that a lodger was again involved, no

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adequate explanation could be reached, and no one claimed responsibility.

I determined to investigate further and took to the streets, heading east to Spruce and the debtors' prison. It was a market day, only two days before Christmas, and I was suddenly aware of the increase in activity and commerce of the city. Shopkeepers were busy selling their wares, and I passed no fewer than three good Germans hauling fir trees home, to engage in that peculiar ritual of placing the trees inside their parlors, then decorating them with balls and candles. As a light snow began its fall, a handsome young lady with a bright red coat and two equally bright packages under her arm strolled by. I watched as she stamped the snow off her high black boots before disappearing into Morton's Sweet Shop. Across the street, an old man stood in animated discussion with his stubborn horse, their breath firing at each other like the powder smoke of muskets in the December air. I reveled in these cheery scenes momentarily, then turned my mind again toward Spruce Street and the business at hand.

"Good day, Constable Franklin," said the jailkeeper, rather coldly, I thought, and without bothering to get up from his game of solitaire. Mr. John Rhuehouse stroked his brown beard, then flipped a card from the pile. "Don't you go telling me you want to be springing another of my customers."

"No, no," I laughed, "I'm just here to ask a few questions concerning those prisoners recently set free." Rhuehouse appeared slightly less disagreeable, yet still eyed me cautiously. I vaguely recalled some words of Benjamin's concerning flattery and how to make use of it. "I have heard it said that never has a prisoner escaped while you have been on the job, and that nothing slips past your sharp eye."

"I guess that's the truth, Mr. Franklin." Rhuehouse straightened a bit in his chair.

"So, when it came time to do a little inquiring, I thought, who better to ask than John Rhuehouse?"

He got up slowly from the chair and nodded his head.

"You know, this thing has got me to thinking, too. Maybe we could put our heads together on this."

"Ha, ha! Wendell," I said to myself, "Benjamin would be proud of my methods."

He went for the key ring on the wall. "Follow me, Constable Franklin, and I'll show you something you might find interesting."

We walked down the cold corridor, past men huddled under their blankets on each side. "This would be cell number four," he said, pointing to a now-empty cubicle at the end of the hall. "Now, all three men let free were in jail cell number four. And this is the only window in this section." He opened the cell door and pulled a chair to one side, then offered it to me. "And that is what you can see from it." He gestured toward the window.

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I mounted the chair and looked beyond the bars into the street. There were two buildings across the way in view, the Philadelphia Land Office, and Miss Darcey's house for women. My gaze rested on Miss Darcey's, as I knew full well hers was more than just a boardinghouse.

"You see it? There lies the answer to these strange goings-on," said the jailer. "A respectable fellow might pay a pretty penny to keep it quiet if he was a customer of Miss Darcey."

"He might indeed. But there must have been others in this cell since the last prisoner was given his freedom."

"Three more, sir. We don't use number four often since it's furthest away from my stove and gets a bit cold. But when we're crowded, we make use of it."

I glanced about the little cell with its stacked beds, one chair, and two wooden buckets. One bucket was filled with water and had a thin layer of ice forming at the top. "Where are the three other men who occupied this cell?"

Rhuehouse pointed out the men, now housed in cells one and two. I questioned each, but found out little. Two were fishermen whose boat had burnt, leaving them with no means to repay the boatmaker. Both spoke mostly Dutch, and very little English. The third was a drifter who had little means and fewer prospects. None of the men had any idea why others had been liberated from that cell but they had not.

"I still say a man might not want his wife finding out he'd been visiting Miss Darcey's," said Rhuehouse with the look of a man who knew of what he speaks. "There's the answer to your little puzzle, Constable."

The news of the death of Charles Tourville, that third and most recent debtor delivered from the prison, was received the next day by those present at the station house. Constable Hurley, our youngest recruit, had been first at the scene of the tragedy and his halting voice showed signs of a man taken a step back by it all. "I was down by Taylor's Alley when I heard a woman crying out. 'Murder, murder,' she shouted, then came tearing out of a shanty, screaming and pulling at her hair. I calmed her down some and went inside, only to find her husband lying on the floor, with a knife in his hand. He was dead as a stump, lying by the fireplace with an iron poker at his side. His name was Tourville, I found out, and his knife had a small bit of blood on it, so he may have cut the man that done him in."

Chief Constable Duncey drummed his stout fingers on the desk before him. "Did the wife get a look at the man?"

"Afraid not, sir. He covered his face with his hands and pushed by her through the door. He was a short fellow and wore a brown cape coat, according to Mrs. Tourville."

"Anything else?" said Duncey.

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"No, sir, I left the woman with a neighbor, barred the door, and rode here to report."

"Very well, then." Duncey rose and stared at me momentarily. I had, with the aid of Uncle Benjamin, cleared up several little matters in my nearly twenty months on the force, adding a few feathers to Duncey's hat as well, so I fully expected to be placed in charge. The chief constable looked reflectively at his hands, then reached a decision.

"Bring the horses, O'Boyle. By Providence, I'll get to the bottom of this myself."

It was just as well, I thought, for it gave me an opportunity to head for Market Street and see what Benjamin would have to say about these new developments.

Benjamin's grandson, William, greeted me at the door and, playing the part of butler, as he so often did, took my hat and night stick, then ushered me into the study. "I shall announce your arrival, sir," he said formally. I tossed him a penny, as is our custom, and he returned to the child, running out of the room and calling for his grandfather.

Benjamin entered presently, and as he was wearing his shoes rather than his slippers, I determined he was heading for the State House. Benjamin didn't give a pin for the fashions; he wore his wig for no one. In his brown waistcoat and white long stockings, he dressed no differently for the politicians than he did for me or any other guest. Indeed, he would have dressed the same for the King of Prussia, should he come calling. Benjamin checked with his pocket watch then took a chair. "And what news, pray tell, brings you by this early?"

I explained my visit to the prison, and the circumstances surrounding the release of Charles Tourville from prison, his unknown benefactor, and eventual death.

Benjamin shook his head. "We must find the right end of this mystery, a starting place where we can unravel the skein. But what common threads can there be among an apprentice, an ex-slave, and a forger? And the death of Mr. Tourville after his release from prison—they must be connected."

"What of the window and Miss Darcey's across the street?" I asked. "It could be that the men who are behind the release of the debtors were customers of the establishment and didn't want the word to get out."

"An interesting theory, that. However, wasn't it Roger Apple who was involved in the release of the young apprentice?"

"It was."

"But Mr. Apple, you see, has little inclination to the women, if you know what I mean, so I truly doubt that he would frequent Miss Darcey's. But I have also made inquiries of my own, Wendell. The

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Negro prisoner was once owned by a man from Wilmington who educated him along with his own children. He was set free four years ago and spent some time in the army, as did the other debtors. That seemed a likely starting point, but there were others in that same cell and one of them was also a soldier during the war." Benjamin stroked his chin reflectively and frowned. "The question remains, Wendell, why were only three released but others who occupied the same cell not?" Benjamin stood and went for his coat. "Sometimes the handwriting is before our eyes, and still we do not see it." He put on his martin hat, his frown now disappearing into a wry smile. "Perhaps a visit to the prison would be in order. But first I have a little business with the executive council at the State House. Shall we meet at three o'clock at the prison?"

I agreed and left wondering what the highly estimable old man had hidden in his ruffled shirtsleeve this time.

I arrived at the prison early, only to find Benjamin's coach parked outside. There was smoke coming from a long pipe on the roof, but no one in the coachman's chair. It was then I remembered Uncle Benjamin's invitation to test his invention. I opened the door and, pulling back the plum-colored curtains, saw the black face and broad smile of Benjamin's man, Bob. Bob shook his head and smiled even more broadly, pointing down at the little metal box. Through two small vent holes near the bottom, the red blacksmith coals glowed. It was as warm as July inside.

"Is Benjamin inside?" I asked, pointing toward the prison.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Franklin."

I looked about the carriage for a moment, at the lantern hanging from the roof, the *Gazette* on a seat, and Benjamin's gold snuff box, a gift from Louis XVI, beside it, then shook my head and returned the coachman's smile. I strode into the prison, finding jailkeeper Rhuehouse at his table.

"Where is Dr. Franklin?"

"He's in jail cell number four," said Rhuehouse, rising in his chair to greet me, "but he asked not to be disturbed."

Disregarding the man's warning, I pulled down the key ring and opened the outer door. It was quite dark inside, save for the flicker of a lantern coming from one of the cells, for Rhuehouse had shuttered the window. I crept down the cold hall toward the lighted cubicle. Uncle Benjamin was lying on his back in the lower bunk.

With hands peacefully folded on his chest, he appeared asleep—or worse. Then, without moving, he spoke. "Give me two more minutes alone to cogitate, Wendell. I perceive a solution to our problem is near."

The minutes passed, then Benjamin emerged and stood rather severely before Rhuehouse. "The conditions here are not acceptable. These men are not common criminals and some are here through no

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fault of their own. In my youth, I came within a hair's breadth of becoming a resident here myself when my printing business came on low times. I suggest this door be kept open and your stove working at full capacity to afford those men at least some degree of comfort."

Benjamin drew in a deep breath and returned to his amiable self. He looked briefly at the prison log book, then nodded to me, pointing his cane towards the door. "The drama awaits, Wendell. We have but two more stops and, with some luck, we shall have our man."

When I gave him a questioning stare, he added, "Patience, my nephew, all in due course."

We found Chief Duncey readying himself to leave as we arrived at the house of the late Mr. Tourville. The undertaker had removed the body, and Mrs. Tourville was being comforted by Parson Brown.

Duncey put on his coat and looked at us rather indifferently. "Snooping about again, Dr. Franklin?"

"Just happened by when I saw the commotion. What can you tell us about the deceased?"

Duncey took us aside, shot a glance at Mrs. Tourville, then lowered his voice. "Very unscrupulous fellow this Tourville was. He ran with a bad lot and had more than a few enemies. He must have gotten into a scrape with one of them. He was either struck with a poker, or pushed back, hitting his head on the edge of the fireplace, according to Dr. Ayers. It's my belief that one of Tourville's rough friends is behind this business and we're rounding them up now." As he spoke, Duncey fingered a small piece of torn paper.

"What have you there?" Benjamin inquired.

"Oh, it's nothing really. An edge of a letter Dr. Ayers found clutched in the dead man's hand. We couldn't find the rest of it, so it must have been snatched by the murderer before he made off. But it's only an edge, and there's no writing on it."

Benjamin reached for the torn corner of paper, unremarkable apart from a smudged black finger mark, but the way it held his attention for several moments told me he had read something in that letter beyond written words.

"I think we can get along without your assistance on this one, Dr. Franklin. We'll turn up something and in short order, if I'm not badly mistaken."

Benjamin smiled, regarding Duncey over the top of his bifocals. "You don't mind if we stay a moment and offer our condolences to the widow?"

"Not at all."

I gave Duncey a hand salute and he lumbered out the door.

Benjamin walked to the dead man's wife and bowed his head respectfully. "Our deepest condolences, madam. Would it be possible to ask you two brief questions concerning your husband's affairs? I believe we may be of some aid in finding the man whom you saw leaving the house."

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"If you think it might help," she said, straightening her disheveled hair with one hand, as the parson patted her other.

"First, did your husband know the identity of the man who paid off his debts?"

"If he did, he didn't say. He kept his business to himself."

"And did he return from prison with any papers?"

"Papers? I don't rightly know. He kept his valuables, what little he had, in that wooden box." She pointed to an old crate with a board missing on one side.

"May we look?"

"If you wish, Mr. Franklin."

Benjamin tapped the chest twice with his cane, like a conjurer at the fair, then lifted its top and pulled out a packet of papers. He read the top letter and turned to Mrs. Tourville. "I believe these letters may be of some import in finding the man who did this to your husband. I assure you, they are of no value in any other respect. If you will agree, I would like to take these with me."

"Yes, yes, do what you must," said the parson, "now please." He rose from his chair and led us to the door. We bowed again and gave our parting condolences.

I tied my horse to the back of his carriage and joined Uncle Benjamin inside. "Where to now?" I inquired.

Benjamin tapped for the driver and he opened the hatch. "To Third Street and Dock."

He removed the letters from his breast pocket and read them briefly. I knew Benjamin revealed his hand at the last moment, and then usually one card at a time, so I waited patiently and tried to imagine who we would be visiting near Third and Dock.

Benjamin, however, predictable only in his unpredictability, looked up from the letters and asked, "Would you care to know who it is we are about to visit?" He handed me the letters from the top of the pile.

Concerning the activities of Eli Marshall, read the heading of the first. *Concerning the activities of William Sutton,* read the second. "All are lodge members, but what does it all mean?"

"Let me begin at the beginning, Wendell. I thought it essential to find the common thread between the three men given leave from their debts. They were a diverse lot, but the one thing familiar to all three, but lacking in those still in the prison, was their education, or more to the point, their ability to read. Apart from that fact, each was in jail cell number four, so it was necessary to visit that jail with a mind to discover a clue written somewhere in that cell."

"And you found it written on the upper bunk, I'll wager."

Benjamin reached for his gold snuff box. "Exactly," he said, reaching inside, then pulling out two licorice drops. He handed one to me, then continued, "It was written by a man whose name you might recognize—Andrew Shellington."

Benjamin paused, allowing me time to sort the matter out.

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Shellington was once a lodge member also. He was carefree with his purse and became a favorite at lodge functions. But his stock took a turn when two ships he invested in were pirated in the West Indies and he ended up deeply in debt.

"But I still don't understand it all, Uncle Benjamin."

"If you will recall, Shellington asked his old lodge friends to lend him enough to pay off his creditors, and when no one stepped forward, he must have become quite embittered. He knew much of the lodgers' business, their pettifoggery and personal vices which they would not want public.

"Being a proud man, he did not want his family to know of his misfortunes. However, when his father, who is a rich land man in Maryland, caught wind of the news, he paid off his son's creditors and Andrew Shellington left town. But before he did, he wrote down all the transgressions of his fellow lodgers and hid them in a straw mattress in the jail cell he occupied."

The coach came to a stop and Benjamin pulled back the curtains, revealing the house of John Mueller, a bootmaker and fellow lodge member, then continued. "Only those prisoners able to read his instructions would find the packet of letters hidden in the straw mattress. A note written on the top bunk told of their presence and gave directions that only one letter be used by a prisoner. When news of the damaging letter came to a lodger's attention, he was more than willing to pay off the debtor's accounts in exchange for it."

"But you found these letters at the home of Charles Tourville."

"Yes, apparently Tourville got a bit greedy. He took the entire packet, with designs for exacting what he could from those lodgers. You were not far off when you suspected Miss Darcey's boarding-house was involved, for I see her name mentioned in at least three of these letters. Others relate mostly to business dealings that might be viewed as a bit underhanded. These respectable men would all, I am sure, pay a price to keep their names above scandal."

Benjamin pointed to the letters he had given me. "John Mueller's name is not among those in this packet, but his mark was on that corner of paper taken from the hand of Charles Tourville. And Mueller does fit the vague description offered by Mrs. Tourville and is a lodger. Let us see what the man has to say for himself, Wendell."

We walked to a house that stood amid a line of other two-story row houses. The light snow continued to fall, giving a clean brightness to the city even though dusk was setting in. A group of carolers were singing farther down the street and the scene would have been most agreeable had it not been for the unpleasant mission we had before us.

John Mueller's bespectacled face showed astonishment at the sight of Benjamin and a touch of despair when he looked behind my uncle and saw me standing there. He was a short, squat man, a bootmaker, whose stubby fingers on his darkened left hand showed the coarseness of a workman. But his right hand was concealed by a glove.

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"You have had an accident?" questioned Benjamin as we took seats in the parlor.

"No, no, just a little thing. My eyesight is not what it once was, so my hammer does, on occasion, miss its mark."

Benjamin frowned, then tapped his foot impatiently. "Mr. Mueller, it is acceptable, among enemies, to occasionally curry the facts, but I have found it wise to be nothing less than candid with friends." He paused for a moment, then added, "You hold your cobbler's hammer with the right hand, do you not?"

Mueller nodded.

"It would indeed be an accomplishment for you to injure the hand that also holds the hammer."

John Mueller bit his lower lip nervously but did not reply.

"Perhaps these letters taken from the house of Charles Tourville will make plain our visit." Benjamin motioned to me and I handed Mueller the sheets of paper.

Mueller read the top letter slowly, seemingly turning paler at every word. "How did you come by this?" he said softly.

"That is a long story. Suffice it to say, the letters were originally written, along with several others, by Andrew Sheffington. His objections were with you and other members of the lodge who would not come to his aid while he was imprisoned. Sheffington knew of the vices and business improprieties of several members and listed them in several letters, which he left in a prison cell upon his departure. The letters fell into the hands of Mr. Tourville before his demise. It is your unfortunate luck to have left the corner of your letter in the hand of the man you killed. That small bit of paper contained the mark from a bootmaker's hand—bootblack."

Mueller swung his hands wildly, pleading, "It was an accident, I swear an accident! I paid off his debts, but the man wanted more. He wouldn't give up the letter and swore he'd take it to the *Gazette* if I didn't come up with more money. When I told him I'd paid enough, he pulled out a knife and cut my hand. I pushed him back with a poker and he must have lost his balance, for he fell back onto the edge of the fireplace. That's when the lady of the house came and I made for the door. I didn't know of his death till hours later." He clasped his hands together and stared at them momentarily, then looked up at Benjamin. "I only wanted my letter back, and to go about my life without a scandal."

"That may be difficult to avoid," I said.

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of children playing in the anteroom. Benjamin rose and opened the door. A great fir tree decked with nuts and candy and brightly colored ribbons stood in a corner. A young boy and girl stood gazing at it. Benjamin closed the door and went for his hat. "Your fate is now in the able hands of Constable Franklin," he said and departed, leaving me alone with John Mueller.

Benjamin Franklin once advised, "There is a time to wink as well

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as to see." This, it appeared to me, was a time for the former. It was, after all, Duncey's case, and this was, after all, Christmas. I bid an astonished Mr. Mueller good evening and headed for the door. For the Franklins, at least, the mystery of the debtors' prison was over.

The light snow had turned heavy as I stood on the street watching Benjamin's coach rattle away, leaving a path of tracks in the snow and a stream of smoke billowing from his long stove pipe.

The snow gave way to a brisk, sunny Christmas day that matched my step and my humor. It was the custom for those unmarried constables to be charged with the holiday rounds. I happened by the debtors' prison at midday and found Mr. Rhuehouse at his post.

"Ah! Mr. Franklin, compliments of the season. I have something in the back you may find interesting." He pointed to the cells and I observed a Philadelphia stove burning bright at the far end of the corridor.

"It came last night with this anonymous dispatch," he said, handing me a crumpled paper, "and I had the men set it in this morning."

I unfolded the note and read it aloud: "Compliments, and in the true traditions of a Free Mason."

"Another little mystery for you, Mr. Franklin," he said after pulling two tin mugs from a shelf and then filling each with Tom Gin. We made one toast to Christmas, one to those who had to work it, and one to the good fellow who left the fine Philadelphia stove. ●

A happy 145th birthday to Sherlock Holmes!

The illusion that Sherlock Holmes was (or is) a real historical figure is entered into wittingly by members of the Baker Street Irregulars, the world's oldest Sherlockian organization, who meet every year on December sixth to celebrate the birthday of their immortal sleuth; but it is also perpetuated more obliquely by those who create modern-day Holmes pastiches—and their number is increasing. Over the past couple of years, three of the mystery genre's best-known anthologists have commissioned brand-new stories for three excellent volumes: see *Holmes for the Holidays,* edited by Martin H. Greenberg, Jon L. Lellenberg, and Carol-Lynn Waugh; *Lost Cases of Sherlock Holmes,* edited by Mike Ashley; and *The Confidential Casebook of Sherlock Holmes,* edited by Marvin Kaye. The stories contained in these collections keep company with a host of other Holmes pastiches at both short story and novel length—indeed, by pure coincidence, two new novels starring Sherlock Holmes are reviewed in this month's Jury Box.

EQMM's practice of joining in the Baker Street Irregulars' birthday celebration by including, annually, a Holmes feature is carried out this year in the clever poem on page 123 by Peter Lovesey. Though other famous fictional sleuths have been resurrected in poetry and fiction (for example, Holmes's *amoureuse* in Mr. Lovesey's poem) none of them has had as long or varied a life as Holmes. Long may he live!

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BUBBLES AND LA BITSCH

by Tim Heald

The band was playing the Radetzsky March, there was just enough of a breeze to flutter the bunting, skirts were an inch or two higher than I remembered from last year, and as I entered the tent I saw a Jeevesian figure shimmering in the middle distance with a tray of glasses frothing golden with the unmistakable promise of the sponsor's latest vintage.

All was right with the world, and I trod lightly on the turf. Not only was this one of the most effervescent days of the English season, but I also had murder on my mind. That really put the icing on my cake.

Before I could get at the champagne I first had to negotiate the toastmaster. This was a necessary hazard. I recognised him, of course, and *he* recognised *me*. Ivor and I are veterans of occasions such as this, grown old in the service of gaiety, name-dropping, and giving the public what it wants. The public, to its chagrin, seldom gets to where Ivor and I can go.

He raised his eyebrow in the time-honoured toastmasterly manner, cleared his throat, and announced my arrival to the rest of the tent. The rest of the tent did not, to be frank, seem unduly interested. They were much too busy picking each other up over glasses of our host's champagne.

Only the receiving line feigned interest. I could hardly blame them. Mine is not a name to conjure with. "Rodney" has acquired such a bad reputation during my lifetime. I don't blame my parents. They were not to know what was to happen to "Rodney" when I was born. At the time, it seemed a sensible upwardly-mobile piece of christening. They could not afford to put me down for Eton or the

Biographer, author of more than a dozen novels, journalist, editor, and humorist: Tim Heald wears all these hats with distinction. Although his first novel, published in '73, was a mystery, he has been equally successful with mainstream fiction. British readers will be able to find his newest book, the humorous novel *Stop Press* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson) in bookstores now; American readers shouldn't miss his last-edited anthology, *A Classic English Crime* (Berkley). †

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Guards and wouldn't have known how, poor dears. So they called me Rodney instead.

As for "Smith," well, *someone* has to be called Smith, and I suppose it might as well be me. I like to think of my forebears beating out ploughshares on an anvil somewhere in Mediaeval England. I have even been known to boast that an ancestor was personal smith to Richard Coeur de Lion and shod his horses' hooves throughout the Crusades. Well, there's no reason why he shouldn't have been "By Appointment to the Lionheart." Someone must have been. When you stop and think about it, Smiths have played a crucial part in our island story. It's just that they have had a rather bad press recently.

Like Rodneys.

The managing director of the English subsidiary and his wife shook hands with me politely, managing not to look over my shoulder to see if there was someone more important coming shortly. I recognised the performance because I like to think I have perfected it myself. It's an essential trick in our line of business. Edward was almost a decade younger than me. I remembered him joining Bitschwiller, mère et fils, fresh out of college. Balliol, as he never tired of reminding everyone. He had been a cocky little beast but I had done my best to help him along, give him the benefit of my experience, and generally ease his passage. I've always felt it important to help the young. It's a way of giving back. One doesn't expect gratitude. That's not the point. On the other hand, it would have been nice.

Today, after all these years, I was still on the Bitschwiller list, still went to their receptions and parties. But I was under no illusion. I was not invited for myself but because of what I had to offer. The cocky little beast had become a cocky middle-aged success, whereas I had stayed precisely where I always was, which, in all honesty, was nowhere very exalted. Edward was rich and secure, handsome, still youngish, with an attractive wife and a clutch of clever, good-looking children. Almost worst of all, he had a full head of hair. There had been times when I could have killed him for his success and his indifference to me. There were almost more times when I could have killed him for that thick thatch of jet-black capillament. I patted the reassuring little bulge under my jacket. Maybe this was such a moment.

The boss of the parent company obviously hadn't a clue who I was, was not alive to the nuances suggested by the names Rodney and Smith, and didn't know my job or my employer. Had he and his wife known that I was a gossip columnist working for a newspaper which is such a rag that I'm not even going to mention its name, they wouldn't have seemed so effusive. They both said they were *enchanté* and gave every impression of meaning it. The French manage this stuff much better than the English, although in this case their ignorance was a help. If they had known more about me, they wouldn't

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have been so cordial. But being French was the crucial difference. They made me feel like a clodhopper just by being French. I could have killed them for that, I thought, but only half seriously. I had stronger motives for murder than Francophobia!

The first slurps of champagne slipped down as easily as ever. I placed the empty glass behind an elegant arrangement of unseasonal blooms on the top table and took a fresh one from a flunkey's salver. Then I surveyed the tent, wondering if my victim had yet arrived. To be honest, I wasn't yet entirely sure whose number was on the bullet. There were several candidates to choose from, all of whom should be here in the Bitschwiller marquee. It would be odd if they weren't. They all normally put in an appearance, whether it was racing at Ascot, rowing at Henley, cricket at Lord's, opera at Glyndebourne, or polo at Windsor. Few, if any of them, were remotely interested in racing, rowing, cricket, opera, or polo but they were devoted to luncheon, particularly if it was free, and most particularly if it was laid on by Bitschwiller. Bitschwiller lunches were legendary.

I had bought the gun from a dealer. The transaction took place in a service flat in one of those enormous impersonal blocks in southwest London which are always supposed to be kept going by MI5, MI6, and shifty gentlemen from the Middle or Far East. Don't think I'm being racist, I'm really not. I don't have a thing about foreigners. In fact, to be truthful, I find the English as loathsome as anyone. It's people I don't like. I'm not fussy about where they come from. But it is true that the apartment buildings I'm talking about do just happen to be full of . . . well, never mind.

Don't ask how I got in touch with the gun dealer. Let's just say that when you've been in journalism as long as I have, you develop a pretty useful network. He was a nasty piece of work, but I wouldn't have expected anything else. Arms dealers rate even lower than gossip columnists, though I like to describe myself as a "diarist." Nobody much is fooled, but it has a certain spurious respectability and it gives my passport more weight in immigration.

I chose a tiny snub-nosed thing with a mock mother-of-pearl handle—the sort of weapon bar girls stick in the top of their fishnets in old Westerns. It says it's a Derringer, but it's made in Taiwan. It doesn't look lethal but, as so often, looks are deceptive. I took it down to Burnham Beeches one afternoon and conducted a target practice. Very satisfactory. I used an old Heinz Baked Beans can and she ventilated that without any trouble. The bonus that I hadn't anticipated was the noise. Pulling the trigger was, in auditory terms, the equivalent of easing the cork out of a bottle of "la Bitsch." Each shot produced a wonderfully mellow little fart. Bitschwiller lunches were characterised by a veritable cacophony of such discreet emissions, so with luck my fatal shot would pass unnoticed save by those most intimately involved.

Araminta was already in the tent. She was looking as decorative

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as ever, though she was getting to an age when that whippet-like skinniness was on the brink of appearing ravaged rather than elegant. I found it strange to reflect that Araminta was probably the only woman I have ever really loved.

Her rejection was painful, though I wonder now whether it was my self-esteem or my passion which was so wounded. I can still see the disbelieving condescension in her expression when I asked her to marry me.

"You?!" she said, *"Me* and *You* . . . married . . . You can't be serious." But, of course, she knew perfectly well that I was serious. That's why she reacted the way she did. She had been happy to share expensive meals, trips to the theatre, and all manner of other treats, but that was as far as it went. It's true that these exoticisms were nearly all freebies or chargeable to expenses, so I wasn't out of pocket. But that wasn't the point. I believe there is no such thing as a free lunch. She *owed* me. I learned later that she had been sleeping with someone else all through our relationship. More than one other person, I believe. If I say it myself, I handled the unpleasantness with considerable sang-froid, but I thought she behaved like a bitch. I could have killed her for what she did. But I never let her realise, never gave her the satisfaction, remained quite friendly, if a tiny bit distant.

Just like today.

"Araminta," I said, silkily. "Lovely to see you."

She was in mauve, with an enormous hat.

"Rodney," she replied. "Lovely to see you, too."

She offered her cheek, coolly, I thought, and I dived under the big brim for a perfunctory peck.

There was nothing much to say after that. She had a man in tow, of course. He was a good deal younger than Araminta—swarthy, South American-looking, with the air of a man who had made himself fit unnaturally. I suspected he had spent time on an indoor cycle machine under a sun-ray lamp. He had a synthetic air about him. Perhaps Araminta always preferred dolls to real people. It would explain a lot.

Neither was interested in me, so I shuffled off in search of the champagne, bumping into little Royce by the pole at the centre of the tent.

Now Royce really was a four-letter man. He was the only person ever to have fired me. Actually, I have always maintained that I resigned before he could do any such thing, but Royce and I both knew that this was not entirely true. It's our secret and you could argue that Royce's reticence over the matter was a mark of decency. You would be wrong, but you could argue the case. In fact, he used it as a device to assert a moral superiority that I did not accept. There had been a misunderstanding over expenses. A trivial matter as far as finances went, but fundamental when it came to principles. I was

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in the habit of claiming for "lunch with contact" or "drink with contact" or sometimes, simply, "entertaining contact." Nothing spectacular. A couple of courses at L'Etoile or the White Tower, bottle of the house white, double espresso apiece. I was definitely not in the premier league when it came to entertainment.

One day Royce asked me to identify my "contacts."

Naturally, I refused. No self-respecting journalist would ever reveal his sources, even to his boss. Least of all to his boss.

But he insisted, and the more he insisted, the more I refused, until what had begun as a minor bureaucratic spat became a grand issue involving, according to Royce, fraud, deceit, corruption, and much else besides.

So I left.

I could have killed him. Fat, self-important, self-righteous little prig.

"Ah, Rodney," he said as we narrowly avoided splashing each other's shirtfronts with Bitschwiller. "Long time, no see."

I smiled. Self-confidently, I hope.

"I hear you're managing editor these days," I said.

"News travels fast," he said. "Unless you rely on the media, eh, ha ha!"

I laughed, too. As humourlessly as he.

"And you?" he enquired. "Same old tricks?" It could have been a wink, or it might have been my imagination. Either way, I was sure it was an intentional double entendre. However, before I could work out whether he had committed a capital offence, we were summoned to our places.

"Luncheon is served," called our toastmaster, and I went off in search of table thirty-seven while Royce headed for somewhere above the salt.

I had been placed, as I feared, at a table reserved exclusively for the ladies and gentlemen of the press. It was near the staff entrance so that our meal was accompanied by a steady ebb and flow of waiters and waitresses, making it a little like lunching on the hard shoulder of the M25. My companions all appeared to be about twelve years old and to work in the accounts or marketing departments of magazines of which I had never heard. They had such names as *Oomph* and *Practical Roller-skating*. Seated to my left was Sharon who had come with Kevin who was the assistant production manager at Global Efficiency International. There was an empty chair on my right. A "no-show" from Japan. The seven of us all shook hands and I hated them all on sight. Or would have done if they had been worth the effort.

The band played a selection from *The Mikado*. The menu was quails' eggs on oriental leaves with a kumquat compote and crayfish mayonnaise followed by a koulibiac of monkfish, orange roughie, mati-mati with a suzuki of sorrel, celeriac, and mango, and finished

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with upside-down pudding of huckleberries and mangosteen with a sloe gin custard. I toyed with the food and thanked God for the champagne which kept coming and going until an observant waiter noticed my liking for the stuff and left a bottle behind.

The affair was going swimmingly. To be honest, I was quite relieved to be in my far corner of the tent. I was certainly not sulking there. On the contrary. My position was a perfect vantage point. My eyes traversed the entire area, took in Edward and Araminta and Royce, and hundreds of others richer, more famous, and better-looking than I, some known to me and others perfect strangers. All perfectly loathsome. I drank a little Bitschwiller and caressed the comforting little bulge under my jacket.

It would soon be time.

During coffee and a pungent little *marc de champagne* a chap from some racing magazine stood up on a chair and went through the card, giving his tips for likely winners. I was paying him a modicum of attention when there was a tap on my shoulder and a braying laugh which I would have recognised at forty paces in the Peruvian jungle. The owner of the laugh was a tall suave figure with a black and white striped tie, which meant he had been to school at Harrow. He also had a binocular case with enough tags and labels to identify the entire lost luggage office.

It was Ainsley Midwinter.

I can't explain why I hated him more than almost anyone else in the world. In truth, I knew very little about him. I only ever saw him at events such as this. He was always at Ascot, Henley, Glyndebourne, St. Moritz, the Hong Kong Sevens . . . you name it. Wherever I saw him he was having an obviously wonderful time. I never saw him not laughing, smiling, or at the very least twinkling. He always had a large cigar in his hand and a fabulous woman on his arm. For some reason he was always friendly and kind to me. He fed me stories, sneaked me into royal enclosures and private dinners, introduced me to wealth and beauty, and always sought me out, even when, as now, I was tucked away in obscure corners of his world. For this I should have been grateful. Instead I hated him. Don't ask me why. His friendship made it worse.

"My dear old fruit!" he exclaimed. "How too, too wonderful to see you. I looked for you with good old Dolly Whatsit and the boys but you were nowhere to be seen. Come and join us for a snifter."

I declined.

"Oh well," he said. "You've got a job to do. I understand. Tell you what, though, why not have a modest flutter on the first race. I've got a runner. Brilliant little filly. She's called Dead Lucky. Good name, eh? Story of my life. 'Dead lucky.' Worth a fiver in anyone's money. You nip out and get some dosh on. There's still a few minutes to go."

I thanked him for the tip.

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"Okay, old boy. Think nothing of it. Must dash. Brief the jockey, doff my hat to the trainer chappie. Know what I mean. Toodle-pip then. Take care. You're looking a bit peaky, if you don't mind my saying so. We must get you out to Montserrat for a weekend. Eh? I'll give you a tinkle."

And he loped off, trailing an exhaust of blue smoke, liqueur, and Givenchy.

I contemplated his departing rear end and couldn't help thinking that it made an inviting and unmissable target. 'Dead Lucky,' eh? We would see.

The tipster had climbed down and the throng was beginning to move off. I poured another glass and was disturbed to find my hand trembling. The moment of truth was fast approaching.

Although I was confident that my shot would be mistaken for the pop of a champagne cork, I wanted to face my victim alone and not in a crowded room. There had to be a moment of grim realisation, an instant in which the grim reaper was plainly glimpsed.

Gradually the room emptied until almost all had departed. Nearly everyone would now be massed around the saddling enclosure or sitting in the stands.

I stood unsteadily and then walked slowly towards the lavatories where, I was certain sure, I would find the person I wanted dead.

There was red carpet on the floor, ruffs and furbelows and bouquets all along the canvas passage. From far away I could hear the stutter of a helicopter overhead blocking out the dull murmur of the crowd on the course.

I opened the door and moved softly to the washbasin.

He was there, as I knew he would be, and for a moment I gazed into his eyes, relishing the fear as he saw the little gun in my hand and knew that this was the end. For a second I allowed myself the luxury of gloating at the face of the person I loathed more than anyone else in the world.

And then, as the corks went on popping in the world outside, I raised the gun to his head and, with a gentle squeeze and a satisfying ripe report, put the poor wretch out of his misery once and for all.

Meanwhile the band played on and Dead Lucky won the first race.

But I never placed my bet. ●

NOTE TO READERS: If you are having trouble finding *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* at your favorite retailer, let us help. First, let the store manager know that you would like the store to carry *EQMM*. Then, send us a letter or postcard with the store's full name and address so that we can contact them too. Write to us at: Dell Magazines Fiction Group, Dept. NS, 6 Prowitt St., Norwalk, CT, 06855-1220.

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THERE, THERE

by E. L. Wyrick

Harry Shafer could not tolerate brains. He could handle buckets of blood, emerging intestines, and protruding bones. He didn't like those things either, but he could handle them.

The sight of oozing brains was a different story.

Georgia Bureau of Investigation agent Christopher Peckham gave his partner's shoulder a little squeeze every time Harry heaved. Christopher noted that Harry must have taken his wife out to dinner the evening before. The variety of colors suggested Chinese food and he knew Harry's wife would never cook Chinese at home. According to Harry, she barely managed hamburgers.

In this second story for EQMM, E. L. Wyrick, of Athens, Georgia, constructs a clever puzzle involving the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. Mr. Wyrick's fiction debut in our Department of First Stories, in 1994, was closely followed by the publication of two of his novels by St. Martin's Press. The author is a public school teacher and counselor who often draws on his experience with the public school system in his fiction.

Christopher heard laughter above him. He looked up and saw two deputies leaning against their patrol car. The glare from the headlights made it difficult to make them out clearly, but the one on the left sounded young. He pointed down and snickered.

Soon, Harry's heaving stopped and he was breathing hard. Christopher gave Harry a handkerchief, then climbed the embankment to the two officers. "Come with me," he said to the young one. Christopher led him down to the body and shined a flashlight on it. The elderly woman was dressed in what would have been considered fine attire thirty years before. She was lying in a ditch ten feet below the road. Christopher aimed the light at her head, showing her crushed skull and brains in sharp detail. Christopher asked, "What's your name?"

"Peterson. John Peterson."

"Tell me, Officer Peterson, how long have you been in uniform?"

"Six months next week."

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Christopher nodded toward the body. "So you've seen a lot of this?"

Peterson nodded his head. "Worked my share of traffic accidents." There was pride in his voice.

"And it doesn't bother you."

"Nope. It's part of the job. If you can't handle it, you don't need to be in the business."

Christopher was silent for a moment, then moved the flashlight to Peterson's face.

The deputy flinched and tried to block the light with his hand. "What're you doing?"

"I want to get a good look at your face. I know your name, but I want to know your face, too. If this stuff doesn't bother you, *you* don't need to be in this business. I'm gonna call Sheriff Foster and tell him I never, I mean *never,* want you to be sent to anything I'm working on again. Now get back up there and keep your mouth shut." Christopher watched Peterson scurry up the bank before moving to the body and kneeling next to it.

Harry, standing behind Christopher now, said, "The kid's young. Full of bravado."

"I know," Christopher said. "We'll see."

Harry directed his flashlight toward the bank. "That's where she tumbled down after the car hit her."

Christopher leaned closer to the mangled head. "*If* a car hit her. The forensics people will tell us a lot more, but this doesn't look right. There's very little trauma to the body except for the head."

Harry squatted next to Christopher, his initial shock having diminished. "It's tough to smash a skull like that. It'd take one strong son of a gun."

Christopher grunted. "Maybe." He was thinking strength wasn't the only factor. Maybe not one at all. Somebody wouldn't have to be particularly strong to do this if he had the right instrument. Leverage makes up for strength.

The sounds of car doors slamming came from the road. Soon, a bevy of flashlights was heading down toward Christopher and Harry. "Come on," Christopher said to his partner. With the crime lab team there, they were free to leave the body.

The two deputies were once again leaning against the front of their patrol car. Christopher approached them and said, "Y'all got the call on this?"

The young one stood at attention. "Yes, sir. A hunter found the body and called it in."

"Relax, son," Christopher said. "Just stop behaving like some kind of high-school jerk trying to impress a cheerleader with how tough he is."

"Yes, sir." He remained rigid.

Harry asked, "How'd you know this woman was from the nursing home?"

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The other deputy answered. "She gets away about once a week. We've picked her up a lot."

The young one said eagerly, "But this was different. At least since I've been here. Always before, it was in the daytime. She always went to the same place, or was headed in that direction."

"Where's that?" Harry asked.

"The East Lawn cemetery. About three miles toward Athens. Apparently, she thought her husband was there."

Christopher gazed up the road. The sky was brightening on the horizon as a December dawn broke through the darkness. "How far is the nursing home from here?"

"A couple of hundred yards is all. On the other side of the river."

Christopher moved in the direction the deputy had pointed. Harry hurried to catch up. "We could take the car, you know," he said.

Christopher used Harry's nickname. "Aw, c'mon, Egret. The walk'll do you good." Harry's full nickname was Egret-on-the-Beach. Christopher had assigned it to him because of his partner's thin stature and high-kneed gait. Harry hated the nickname, but he liked Christopher, so he never complained. Christopher asked, "You know anything about this place?"

"A little. My neighbor's grandmother was in there." Harry was falling behind. He picked up his pace and shoved his hands in his pockets to ward off the cold. "It's not your normal nursing home. There are several . . . levels, I guess you'd call it. Depends on the condition of the person and how well they can take care of themselves. My neighbor's grandmother started in an apartment and ended up on a critical-care floor before she died." Harry glanced at Christopher. "I can tell you one thing. It ain't cheap."

Christopher blew air through puffed cheeks. "Her clothes were old, but they weren't cheap either. Neither was the jewelry she was wearing."

A biting wind began to blow as the two walked toward the sunrise. Harry said, "Dalmeyer called after you left yesterday. He's getting a little irritated, Christopher. He said for me to tell you he expects a call today. 'No excuses,' he said."

Christopher didn't respond.

"Look, it's none of my business, but when the agent-in-charge wants to talk to you, it probably behooves you to do that, career-wise." Harry looked at Christopher. "What's he doing in Atlanta anyway?"

Christopher stared straight ahead. "You say this home's an expensive place."

Harry sighed in resignation. The Dalmeyer thing had been going on for three days. "Very expensive."

"The woman was wearing some fine jewelry. She's no Medicaid case."

"Didn't look like it."

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"More than likely, she had money."

"From what my neighbor said, probably a lot of it."

They didn't need to talk anymore. Both were thinking the same thing—the first question of any murder investigation: Who benefits?

Or, in this case, Who inherits?

"She was ninety-three. Yesterday." The director of the facility pushed his chair away from the conference-room table and crossed his legs.

"Yesterday?" Christopher said.

The social worker said, "Yes. We had a party for her and her family came. Mrs. Jensen had a wonderful time." She dabbed her eyes with a tissue.

A large woman in a nurse's uniform looked at the social worker. "Darla, Mrs. Jensen didn't know a birthday party from a bath, which I had to give her after she tried to stuff the cake down her blouse. Fact is, if you ask me, if she liked anything, she liked the bath a whole lot better."

Christopher knew then who he wanted to talk to. He looked at the nurse. "Ms. . . . ?"

"Just call me Joanie, honey."

"Joanie, tell me about Mrs. Jensen and her family."

The director uncrossed his legs. "Now, Agent Peckham, Nurse Wilkes doesn't deal with the families." He nodded toward the social worker. "Mrs. Peters does that more than anybody. I believe her information would be much more accurate."

Christopher kept his eyes on Joanie. She smiled, arched her eyebrows, and crossed her arms under her massive breasts. The agent had a great desire to simply tell the director to get lost. But there was no sense in irritating him any more than he had to. Christopher said, "Egret, how about Darla and Mr. Humphrey showing you Mrs. Jensen's room?"

Harry stood. "Sure thing."

"But—" the director said.

Christopher cut him off. "Her room could provide a critical piece of evidence."

The director said, "I'm telling you, Nurse Wilkes doesn't know anything about the family."

Christopher took a deep breath. Sometimes, avoiding irritating folks was impossible. Some people demanded it. "I'm conducting an investigation of a possible murder, Mr. Humphrey. Go with Agent Shafer. Now."

Harry leaned toward the director and said into his ear, "I think you better come with me. Obstruction of justice and all that." He winked and patted the director on the back.

When the nurse and Christopher were alone, he asked, "Why doesn't your boss want me to talk to you?"

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"Scared."

"Scared of what?"

Joanie shrugged her shoulders. "Everything. The man stays terrified. This is an expensive place and he's paid well. A whole lot better than if he directed any old run-of-the-mill nursing home. Afraid I'll say something that'll get him in trouble."

"Do you know something that'll get him in trouble?"

The nurse laughed. "That's what's so crazy. He ain't got nothing to worry about." She leaned forward, crossing her arms on the table. "I got this thing about old people. I like to work with them. Guess it comes from taking care of my granny all those years. Most of the nurses can't wait to get out of here. But I can tell you that this place is a sight better than most homes I've worked in. Things are done right here. He's just what you call paranoid, you know?"

Christopher knew. "So, tell me about Mrs. Jensen and her family."

"Well, really, she ain't got no direct family. Never had no children. Fact is, all she's got in that regard is her nephew and his wife."

"Tell me about them."

"They're good folks. Come here once a week to visit. Sometimes a couple of times a week. Both of them must be in their seventies, I'd guess. But real lively. Know what I mean? Always joking around, both of them. At least until Mrs. Jensen had her stroke and had to move to critical care."

"Something changed then?"

"Wasn't nothing unusual. It's harder to talk and joke when the resident can't hardly remember who the visitors are. I mean, sometimes she'd remember, but most times she wouldn't. Mrs. Blackstone seemed real concerned about that. Not at first, but here lately I'd catch her crying out in the hall. And Mr. Blackstone used to go over Mrs. Jensen's finances with her. He tried after the stroke, but it was useless, so he quit."

Christopher leaned forward. "You heard those conversations?"

"Well, I was in here a lot. I didn't mean to listen in, but—"

"I'm not accusing you of eavesdropping, Joanie. You could help us out here. We'll know all about Mrs. Jensen's financial situation pretty soon, but the sooner the better. What can you tell me about that?"

Joanie shifted in her chair. "Mr. Peckham, I hear lots of things here. I can't go round talking about that."

Christopher nodded.

"But, I will tell you, she had plenty. He kept talking about how hard it was to stay below six hundred thousand. Had something to do with estate taxes." She crossed her arms again. "I want to ask you something. You think Mrs. Jensen was murdered?"

Christopher shrugged. "We'll know more from the lab guys, but it looked like that to me."

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"And you think Mr. and Mrs. Blackstone had something to do with it?"

"Not thinking anything now. Just gathering information."

Joanie shook her head. "Can't imagine that. Seems like they liked her a lot. Lots of folks come to visit out of guilt, or something. Come in and leave real fast. The Blackstones always tried to make it a real nice visit, even after the stroke."

"Anybody else visit her?"

"Not many. Mrs. Jensen wasn't from around here. The Blackstones' children came now and again. Like yesterday, for the birthday."

"Tell me about them."

"Don't know nothing to tell. One's a son and one's a daughter." She thought for a moment. "The daughter and her husband don't get along too well, I know that."

"How? Did they have a fight?"

"A real quiet one. The husband was complaining about the money she spent on a birthday present for Mrs. Jensen. But I could tell it wasn't no new dispute. You learn to tell stuff like that when you're in the people business like me."

Christopher gave Joanie a card from his wallet. "You've been a big help, Joanie. If you think of anything, anything at all, give me a call."

Outside the nursing home, Harry was standing in front of Mrs. Jensen's window. "The window was unlocked. The director and the social worker seemed really worked up about that."

Christopher was leaning on the bricked wall next to the window. "According to the locals, Mrs. Jensen ran away on a regular basis. Why would they keep her in a room with a window that could be unlocked?"

"Yeah, I wondered that, too. Being the crack detective I am, I asked them. They said the fire code requires available exits unless the person's a danger to other folks. Mrs. Jensen didn't fit the profile."

"So why were they surprised about an unlocked window in the room of someone who ran away all the time?"

"Asked that too." Harry pointed to the top of the window. "The lock's way up there. The fire code doesn't say they have to make it easy, just available. She'd never gone through the window before and had never left at night. Usually slipped out some door during the day."

Christopher stepped away from the building. "It sure would have been nice if her room wasn't next to the parking lot." He poked a toe at the asphalt. "I doubt the lab guy's will find anything useful here. Especially since it's been so dry."

"Maybe fingerprints on the window."

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"That'd be nice. Ready to notify the next of kin?"

"I hate that part."

"Well, then, Egret," Christopher said, "let's put it another way. How about we start notifying the best suspects we have as of now?"

"That part, I like better."

"If the folks inside that house are suspects, ain't no way this is a murder-for-money deal," Harry said.

Christopher nodded. The two agents sat in their car parked on the side of a road fronting a large, well-kept farmhouse. Christopher estimated the home was over four thousand square feet. At least a hundred acres of pasture lay behind it. New subdivisions surrounded the land. Car after car sped by the men as they sat.

Harry reached in his pocket and rearranged the keys and change that were digging into his leg. "Atlanta's come to this place. The land's got to be worth . . . a million, anyway."

"Maybe more. The house by itself, maybe three hundred thousand."

"Maybe they're land rich and cash poor."

Christopher shook his head. "Doesn't have that look to it. When that happens, the details begin to wither. According to my dad, during the depression you could tell when folks were hurting by their shoes. They'd put on a good front, but the shoes would be worn and scruffy. Nothing scruffy about this place anywhere." He tapped on the steering wheel. "Let's get to it."

The woman who answered the door fit the description Nurse Jensen had given to Christopher. Her white hair was short and wavy—smart-looking without the appearance of someone trying to hide her age. "Mrs. Blackstone?" Christopher asked.

"Yes."

Christopher showed his ID. "I'm Agent Peckham with the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. This is Agent Shafer."

Mrs. Blackstone's eyes narrowed briefly, then she smiled. "My, my . . . the GBI. How can I help you?"

"We need to talk to you, ma'am."

"Certainly." She opened the door. The agents followed her through a small parlor into an expansive living room. She invited them to sit.

Christopher said, "May I ask if Mr. Blackstone is available as well?"

Mrs. Blackstone cocked her head. "Ted's on the tractor. Trying to get the last of the hay cut before the season's over."

"It would be better if he were here. How long do you suppose he'll be?"

Mrs. Blackstone laughed. "Should be in at lunchtime, if he remembers. Sometimes he forgets about eating and sometimes he just gets something from one of the trees. Persimmons in the summertime. Apples about now." She sat back in her chair, regarding the two

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men. "I must say, I'm curious. Would you mind telling me why you're here?"

Christopher looked at Harry. Maybe one at a time would be better. "Mrs. Blackstone, I've got some difficult news. I'm afraid that your aunt, Mrs. Jensen, passed away during the night."

Mrs. Blackstone sat straight. "Oh no." She rubbed her forehead with her fingers. "We were there just yesterday. She was fine."

"I'm sorry," Harry said.

The three remained silent. Mrs. Blackstone moved across the room and retrieved a handkerchief from her purse. She dabbed tears as she moved back to her chair. "Something else must be wrong. Why did *you* come to tell us?"

Christopher said, "She was found by the side of the road. Not far from the nursing home."

Mrs. Blackstone shook her head. "She was always leaving there. She'd go to the cemetery, or try to."

"I'm sorry to have to say this, but your aunt suffered a great deal of trauma. It appears that her death may not have been natural."

"So that's why you're here."

"Yes, ma'am. It isn't definite yet, but the preliminary investigation suggests foul play."

Harry looked at Christopher. Foul play? How about a vicious murder, he thought.

Christopher continued to watch Mrs. Blackstone.

"Who would want to kill a helpless old lady?"

Christopher shrugged sympathetically.

The sound of a screen door slamming came from the back of the house. "That's Ted," Mrs. Blackstone said. "I'll be right back."

After Mrs. Blackstone left, Harry stood and moved to one of several china cabinets that lined the walls of the large room. Carefully displayed memorabilia covered the shelves—pictures of ancestors, a well-used cookbook, a framed set of coins—all carefully labeled. He walked to another cabinet. Apparently, Ted had been a pilot. This one contained pictures of World War II vintage airplanes and artifacts of the now defunct Eastern Airlines. "Nicely done," Harry said.

"Yes," Christopher responded. "A very homey museum."

Mrs. Blackstone reappeared, followed by Ted. He wore jeans, boots, and a battered, gritty Stetson. Christopher stood and extended a hand.

Ted's handshake was firm. "Phyllis told me why you're here. You think somebody killed her aunt?"

"Don't know yet," Christopher said. "The injury suggests that's a possibility."

"Enough for the GBI to be involved," Ted said as he sat heavily in a rocking recliner.

Christopher sat on the edge of the sofa, his elbows on his knees. He nodded.

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Ted looked at his wife, who was straightening a picture on the wall, then back at Christopher. "I would guess you want to know about the will. What's the phrase? Who benefits?"

Phyllis Blackstone moved to her husband and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Since Ted retired, he's become quite a reader. Mysteries are his favorite."

"You flew for Eastern?" Christopher asked, nodding to the display.

"Yes." He removed his hat and placed it in his lap. "According to Aunt Cassie's will, her estate is divided among us and our children. She has no other family."

Christopher said, "We don't need to get into this right now. I know our news was unexpected."

"No. I'd rather get it over with. I've had power of attorney for Aunt Cassie's affairs for . . ." He looked at his wife. "What? Three years?"

Phyllis nodded. "At least that long." She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and Ted took her hand.

"If we wanted her money, I could have just written a check. We could have kept her here. There was no one to challenge what I did. I've got complete records of all expenses."

Christopher stood. "I know you have much to do. Again, I'm very sorry to have to bring you difficult news."

As the group moved through the small parlor, Ted asked, "I suppose you'll be talking to our children, too."

Christopher stopped and turned. "At this point, I'm not sure what we're going to do."

Ted nodded.

Phyllis said, "Elizabeth is having a difficult time just now. Please be gentle if you talk to her."

Twenty minutes later, the two agents were sitting under a large water oak at a picnic table adjacent to Owen Webb's Snack Shack. The bright Georgia sunshine had defeated the early morning chill. "So, what do you think?" Harry asked as he dipped a french fry in ketchup.

Christopher had just taken a bite of his fish sandwich. He held up a hand and chewed. After a sip of tea, he said, "All appearances suggest money's not a motive for the Blackstones."

"Sure looks that way."

"How about verifying that. I'll drop you by the office. Check on what happened to Eastern pilots' pensions when the airline went bankrupt."

"Good thought. And you?"

"Gonna visit Elizabeth."

The Blackstones' daughter walked with the help of crutches as she led Christopher to the kitchen table. "Just call me Liz," she said as she sat. She put her foot on a chair. "Had bone spurs removed a month ago. They said that'll make my feet better. I'd sure like to

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know when that's gonna happen. I'm scheduled to get my tonsils out, finally, next week." She waved at her foot. "And I sure thought I'd be over this by then. Those doctors don't know anything, you know what I mean?" She grabbed her neck and sighed. "Got this crick last night. I took two Tylenol 3s left over from the operation but nothing works. . . ."

Christopher waited for an opening. When none came after five minutes of listening to Liz's trials and tribulations, he interrupted her. "Mrs. Gurley, I need to tell you—"

"About Aunt Cassie? I already know. Mama told me. She said you'd be coming." Liz reached under her leg and lifted it from the chair, setting it gently on the floor. "I'm really sorry to hear about what happened to her. Mama said it was some kind of an accident. She was running away from the home again. She was always doing that." Liz shook her head. "To tell you the truth, I didn't know her very well. Oh, Mama'd told us stories, but Aunt Cassie lived out in California until she came to the nursing home. We only went out there a few times. Just yesterday, we were there for her birthday. We'd have stayed longer, but David was acting like a jerk, as usual. David's my husband. We're in counseling, you know. I want to have children, and he doesn't want any. He says they'd be too expensive. Of course, he makes plenty, so I don't know what he's worried about. That's what we're talking about in counseling now. And Mama doesn't need this. Not since her spell she had at the Toastmasters. Transient global amnesia, they called it. We thought it was a stroke. I think the doctors just don't know what happened to her. Doctors. Like I said, they don't know anything. But it was hard. My mama didn't even know what year it was, or any of us. The Toastmasters couldn't believe the Iron Lady went nutty on them—right there during the ceremony. But she's all right now, thank God. Then, right after that, David had to have his flight physical and they said he had this problem . . ."

Christopher sat and listened. Liz Gurley talked. A lot. In one way, it was the easiest interview the GBI agent had ever conducted. On the other hand, he hoped he could remember everything. In his car, he tried to take notes on what he'd heard, but was afraid he'd missed something. There was so much.

Liz had talked about her brother. He was a high-school science teacher. Christopher decided to visit him that night.

When Christopher arrived home, Sam was there to great him, as usual. The neighbor's Labrador retriever stood in the driveway, two feet away from a tennis ball. He stared at the ball, glanced at Christopher, then at the ball, his tail wagging slightly. When Christopher kicked the ball, Sam's saliva flew off it. Before Christopher could reach his front porch, Sam was back. He chomped on the

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ball a dozen times, then flipped it toward Christopher. "That's all, Sam," Christopher said. "I've done my duty."

Jackie Peckham was sitting on the porch. "It'd be all right if he wouldn't slobber all over it."

"The dog's demented," Christopher said as he sat in a wooden rocker next to his wife.

"Obsessive/compulsive," replied Jackie. Sam mouthed the ball again, flipped it on the porch, and stood staring at it. "Just like you. I'd think you two could relate well."

"I'm not obsessive."

Jackie nodded her head and pursed her lips. "So, if that's the case, I presume we can look forward to an intimate evening at home tonight."

Christopher closed his eyes and squeezed them. "Egret called."

"About ten minutes ago. He wants you to call him."

"An elderly lady was murdered."

"Yes. I heard on the radio. Egret filled in the rest."

"I need to see one of the inheritors tonight."

"Of course."

"It's important. The first forty-eight hours are critical."

"I know. I don't mind." Jackie handed Christopher their portable telephone. "Just so you don't start slobbering all over everything."

Christopher took the telephone and allowed some drool to escape from his mouth.

"Oh, yuck." Jackie stood and moved toward the front door of the house. "I'm going inside and write a letter to Ann Landers about my sicko husband." She slapped his head as she moved past him. "Oh. Bill Dalmeyer called again. I wish you'd call him back. I'm tired of making excuses. You need to fish or cut bait, Christopher. Decide."

Christopher didn't call Agent-in-Charge Dalmeyer, but he did call Harry, who confirmed what Christopher suspected. The Blackstones' finances were solid. "Ted Blackstone retired from Eastern in nineteen eighty. His pension was unaffected by the bankruptcy. And it's a good one."

Sam had crept onto the porch again and tossed the ball toward Christopher. "Did you talk to your friend at the bank?"

"Yeah. About a month ago, Blackstone remortgaged his farm. He blocked off the house and ten acres from the other ninety acres, so the house is free and clear. It looks like he's planning to join his neighbors and subdivide his farm. But he doesn't have to. Blackstone's financial statement made that clear. They're not hurting."

Christopher leaned forward, picked up the glistening tennis ball with two fingers, and threw it over the porch railing. Sam yelped and went after it. Christopher told Harry about his interview with Liz Gurley. He ended by saying, "The crutches present a problem as to opportunity."

"And the brother?"

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"I'm going to see him tonight."

"Tonight?" Harry's voice was plaintive.

"You don't need to go."

"Thanks. Kalli's band concert is tonight. I promised her I'd make it this time."

"No problem. Enjoy."

"Christopher, this is a middle-school band concert. You don't enjoy those. You endure them."

After clicking off the portable phone, Christopher moved to Sam and scratched his head. The Lab didn't take his eye off the ball. Christopher remembered all the events he'd missed as his kids grew up. "You and me, Sam," he said. "Looney as a Toon, the both of us."

"Mom Blackstone said you'd be coming." The woman backed away from the door, inviting Christopher in. "Jimmy's in his workshop."

She led him through a living room and down a set of stairs to a finished basement. Jimmy Blackstone's workshop was off a room that appeared to serve as a den. The sofa was scruffy, with a sheet covering the seating area. Jimmy was squatting, using a screwdriver to open a vacuum cleaner. He glanced at Christopher, then returned to his task. "Sorry. My wife's having a fit. Some PTA people are coming over tonight and the vacuum quit sucking." He looked at Christopher. "Wonderful thing to come home to."

"I understand," Christopher said. "Go ahead." Jimmy nodded and went back to work. He was wearing a cotton, button-down oxford shirt and silk tie. His brown pants were well-tailored. Jimmy shifted position and Christopher could see his shoes—tan Hushpuppies, worn and stained.

Soon, Jimmy held up a mass of fibrous material. "The culprit." After reassembling the vacuum cleaner, he picked it up and said, "Be right back."

Christopher examined the workshop. Two walls were covered with pegboards, a wide variety of tools hanging from them. He moved along the walls, examining them. A number would make fine weapons. On the other side of the room, an office area had been created from closet space. A Packard Bell PC sat there along with a basket filled with envelopes. Christopher glanced toward the door, then flipped through the pile. They were bills. Lots of them—more than twenty. The collection included three MasterCards and two Visas, along with several from department stores. It appeared Jimmy Blackstone depended heavily on credit.

Christopher heard footsteps on the stairs and moved quickly to the workshop's door.

Jimmy held a glass in each hand. "Let's go in the den. I brought us some lemonade."

After settling in a recliner, Jimmy stroked his beard and said, "You're here about Aunt Cassie, I presume."

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Christopher, who was on the sofa, nodded.

"And I suppose all heirs are suspects."

"At this point, we have no suspects. For all we know, we'll be looking for a hit-and-run driver."

"Oh. Mother seemed to think you had decided my aunt was murdered. It's good to know she might not have been."

Unlike his sister, Jimmy wasn't a talker. The two sat in silence. Christopher broke it by saying, "Tell me about your aunt."

Jimmy leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, grasping his lemonade with two hands. "Until a few years ago, I'd never met Aunt Cassie. The fact is, when Mother told me she was coming from California, I couldn't remember who she was. How we were related, you know? All I had was a vague memory of her name being mentioned from time to time. Since she's been here, we've gone to see her a few times. Maybe ten, fifteen minutes each time." He sipped his lemonade. "I'm sorry she died. But really, she's been pretty much dead since her stroke."

Christopher nodded and silence ensued again. That's the way it went—a question followed by a quick answer, then silence.

Jimmy's wife appeared. "I'm sorry to interrupt you, but Kathleen's about to go to her meeting. She needs sixty dollars for her cheerleader shoes. They said tonight's the deadline."

Jimmy's eyes closed briefly, and he took a quick breath. He pulled out his wallet, retrieved a worn check from it, filled it out, and gave it to his wife. She was standing next to Christopher, and he took a furtive glance at the check. It was from a credit-card company.

When the two were alone again, Christopher said, "I have one last question. Sorry, but I have to ask. Where were you last night?"

Jimmy stared at him for a moment. "Right here. I went to bed about . . . eleven."

"Watching something on television?"

"No. I was reading a book called *Until Death.*"

"Murder mystery?"

"Yeah. By Polly Whitney," Jimmy said. "My dad loaned it to me."

Christopher stood. "Again, I'm sorry for the questions. I know it's difficult. We have to ask."

"No problem," Jimmy said as he rose. "You're just doing your job."

At the front door, Jimmy said, "Listen, like I said, I know you have to do your job, but I hope you'll be gentle with Mother. She's had a hard time lately."

"Your sister told me about her . . . episode."

"It was a scary thing. Mother's always been so strong. Even more since she's gotten older. She's become quite in demand as an inspirational speaker. Seeing her struggle to remember our names was hard."

"I'm sure," Christopher said. As he drove away, he thought about Mrs. Blackstone's different messages to her children. She had told

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her daughter Aunt Cassie died from an accident. She'd admitted to her son that murder was suspected. Apparently, she had accepted the reality of the situation. Or maybe there was a reason why she told different stories to her children. Christopher had no idea what that might mean. It was just something to think about.

The oak desk Christopher had painstakingly restored creaked when Donald Cooper perched on it. Christopher might have said something, except for the file the three-hundred-plus-pound criminalist held in his hand. It contained the preliminary lab results regarding Cassie Jensen.

"We put the time of death at two-oh-three A.M." Cooper said.

Christopher leaned back in his desk chair. "Couldn't you be more precise?"

Cooper wheezed when he laughed. "Her analog watch got smashed in the attack, probably from trying to protect her head. The watch had a date window and the date was correct, so we assume that it was working." He tossed the file on the desk. Christopher picked it up quickly, fearing what the additional weight would do to his restoration project. As he flipped through it, Cooper said, "There's no doubt this wasn't a car accident. She was hit, we figure, five times with a blunt instrument. An indentation on the right side of the skull gave us a pretty good measurement. It looks like something the size of a mallet. But the preliminary examination indicates the weapon was made of metal, not wood or rubber. My guess is something like an engineer's hammer."

"An engineer's hammer?" Christopher's question was rhetorical. He knew the tool. In fact, he'd seen one the night before.

"Right. They're larger than a regular hammer and are used for—"

Christopher held up his hand. "I know. My dad had one."

"Well, that's just a guess. But the dimensions are right."

"Anything else?"

"Not on the body. Clean as a whistle so far." Cooper stood, causing the desk to creak again. "One interesting thing, though. The lock on the window had no fingerprints."

"None?"

"Clean as a whistle, too. I mean, absolutely pristine."

Christopher shook his head. Stupid. "So, somebody wiped it."

"Sure looks like it. Now, why would anybody do that? There's dust all over the sill, but hardly a speck on the latch."

"Somebody who was there recently."

"Very recently."

"Like yesterday."

Cooper walked toward the door. "Like yesterday. Happy hunting."

Christopher leaned on his elbows over his desk and twiddled his thumbs. The mistakes people made amazed him. A lack of evidence

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was often as telling as a confession. Somebody in that room yesterday unlocked the window, then wiped the latch clean. The scenario was clear. The murderer returned during the night, opened the window, and managed to get Aunt Cassie through it.

Harry Shafer appeared at the door. "How'd it go last night?"

Christopher told his partner about Cooper's report and the hammer. "I saw one last night. Hanging on Jimmy Blackstone's pegboard. An engineer's hammer, big as life." He told Harry about the bills. "It's the ninth day of the month," he added, "and Jimmy Blackstone needs sixty dollars, so he uses a credit-card check when his daughter needs money. The guy's in deep doo-doo. And, he dresses nice, except for—"

"The shoes."

"Exactly."

Harry leaned on a file cabinet. "So we got an inheritor who was at the nursing home yesterday, giving him the opportunity to unlock the window, is deep in debt, owns a tool that fits the murder weapon, and wears lousy shoes. This is looking good."

Christopher nodded, but wasn't smiling.

Harry said, "You have doubts."

Christopher shrugged. "I don't know."

"The gut don't buy it?"

Shrugging again, Christopher stood. "Let's go over there."

"Without a warrant?"

"I don't think we'll need one. Jimmy'll be at school. I didn't spend much time with Jimmy's wife, but my guess is she'll cooperate."

"Any reason?"

"Like you said, just a gut thing."

Harry and Christopher sat on one side of the kitchen table and Jimmy Blackstone's wife sat on the other. She said, "Jimmy was here Sunday night. All night."

"How can you be sure?" Christopher asked. "He could have slipped out after you went to bed."

She shook her head. "No way."

Christopher raised his eyebrows.

"I never went to bed. Didn't go to sleep either."

"I noticed you looked tired last night."

She sighed deeply. "I don't know what's going on. Raging hormones, I guess. It drives me crazy. Can't sleep, but I'm exhausted all the time." Her eyes narrowed suddenly. "Wait a minute. You think I looked tired because I was helping Jimmy kill Aunt Cassie? Talk to my doctor. I can show you bottles of hormones that didn't work and the thyroid medicine they're trying now. Jimmy was in bed all night Sunday night and I was sitting in a recliner just outside the bedroom watching TV. And that's the truth."

"Relax, Mrs. Blackstone, I believe you," Christopher said. "But we

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do need something." He described the hammer. "You understand we have to follow up on everything."

"Take what you want. Jimmy didn't go anywhere. I know that. And I didn't either."

"Could you tell me about your sister-in-law?"

"Liz? Oh, lordy."

Christopher arched his eyebrows.

"Listen, don't get me wrong. She's a wonderful person. She'll do anything for anybody. But . . ."

"Yes?"

Jimmy's wife shook her head. "I shouldn't say this, but she never shuts up. And their medical bills must be horrendous. If a physical ailment exists, she has it. And I can tell you she didn't have anything to do with Aunt Cassie's death either."

"How can you be sure?"

She said with certitude, "Because she would have told me by now. Believe me, she couldn't help herself."

Harry said, "Even about murder?"

"Especially that."

Christopher stood. "Thanks for your help, Mrs. Blackstone. If you don't mind, we need to get the hammer now." When Mrs. Blackstone began to rise, Christopher held out a hand. "I know the way. We'll be right back."

Minutes later Christopher and Harry reentered the kitchen. Christopher held an evidence bag containing the engineer's hammer. He stopped just outside the front door. "I know this has been hard for you."

Jimmy's wife rubbed her eyes. "It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for all this suspicion about the family. I mean, none of us knew Aunt Cassie very well. Hardly at all. But I know this is real hard for Mama Blackstone."

"Of course," Harry said.

"She's just getting over the attack she had. She doesn't need the stress. I worry about her. She's always been such a vibrant woman—giving her speeches, doing aerobics, community service. Seeing her in the hospital that way was difficult. I don't want that to happen again."

Christopher nodded. He liked this woman who obviously cared a great deal for her in-laws.

Harry was driving with one hand and opening a bag with his teeth.

"Pork rinds?" Christopher asked.

"Yeah," Harry said. "I'm adopting my brother's attitude about cholesterol."

"What's that?"

"The higher the level, the better. He figured if the cholesterol was floating around in the blood, it wasn't stuck to the veins."

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"Interesting theory." Christopher flipped through his notebook. "I didn't know you had a brother."

"He died . . . uh . . . six years ago." Harry crunched on a rind. "Heart attack." Christopher looked up from his pad. Harry wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and wiped the back of his hand on his pants. "So what do you think?"

"I think you're lying."

"Lying? About what?"

"Your brother."

"Nope. He was fifteen years younger than me. Had a massive heart attack during a pickup basketball game. They did an autopsy. He had that syndrome—you know, that thing skinny people like us have. No problem with clogged veins." Harry crunched another pork rind. "I was talking about Jimmy and his wife."

Christopher began flipping through his notebook again. "I think the wife's telling the truth."

"Me too." Harry patted the bag holding the engineer's hammer. "If this is clean, I think he's clean."

Harry's fingers left a stain on the bag. Christopher said, "I wish you hadn't done that."

"What?"

"Messed up the bag. You know how nutty Dalmeyer's been since the O. J. thing. It looks like you took it home and ate dinner on it."

"Aunt Cassie ain't O. J." Harry's tone was defensive. "And Dalmeyer worries too much."

Christopher blew air. "I know. On both counts."

"But I suppose that's how he got to be agent-in-charge."

"Not for long."

"Eh?"

"Oops."

"Forget the 'oops.' Too late. What's going on?"

"This can't go anywhere."

"Nowhere."

Christopher sat silently for a moment, then shook his head. "Nope. I can't. You'll have your 'oops,' too. Always happens. It's just human nature."

"All right, then don't tell me. I'll just conjecture. Dalmeyer's going to Atlanta and you're up for agent-in-charge."

Christopher remained silent.

"And that's why you're worrying about the bag." Harry crumpled the pork-rind bag and tossed it on the car's floor. "Guess you might make it, worrying about stuff like that and all."

It was one of those little moments Christopher had had before. A moment of clarity. Like when he decided to leave the Methodist ministry after eighteen months to join the GBI. He'd been drafted into the army two weeks before the draft ended and had been assigned to the MPs. His intelligence was recognized, and he was quickly shifted

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to an investigation unit. He liked it. When his army stint ended, he went into the seminary. He'd announced his intentions to the congregation when he was seventeen and didn't want to break his promise. One night, after a difficult session with the pastoral relations committee, his wife had said, "God's work can be done in many ways, Christopher." A moment of clarity. He applied to the GBI the next day.

Suddenly, Christopher knew why he'd been avoiding Dalmeyer and the decision. He didn't want to have to worry about dumb stuff.

"Close, but no cigar," Christopher said to Harry. "I don't want to be agent-in-charge." He didn't say the decision had been made moments before. "Now, on Jimmy, like I said, I believe his wife. He was home all night, and so was she."

"So, where does that leave us?"

"Liz, the daughter. She and the husband don't get along, according to Nurse Joanie. She heard their argument about money and Liz confirmed that. The problem is, she's on crutches and can hardly get around. Whoever got Aunt Cassie out of that window had to crawl into the room and lift her out. No way the daughter did that on crutches."

"Maybe her husband helped."

"No way. He had a trip that night and left right after the birthday party. I checked today. He was at thirty-five thousand feet over Albuquerque at two-oh-three."

Harry picked a pork rind sliver from between his two front teeth. "And Phyllis and Ted don't need the money. Besides, Ted has power of attorney so he could get what he needed anyhow. They had no need to kill his wife's aunt."

Harry stopped the car in front of Christopher's house. Christopher said, "There are motives other than money."

"True. Maybe a little nursing home hanky panky was going on and one of the other residents got jealous. Remember that woman in the television room? The real mean one who bopped that guy when he turned the TV to *Jeopardy?* She was big enough, too." Noticing Christopher's stare, Harry said, "Guess not."

"I'm thinking about the nursing home's director. His anxiety level was sky high and the nurse told me he didn't have a reason to be. Maybe he knew something the nurse didn't know. Worried about Aunt Cassie saying something."

Harry nodded equivocally. "It's a stretch, but who knows? The locals interviewed the nursing home folks, but maybe I ought to go back and do it myself."

Christopher climbed from the car, picked up the newspaper from the lawn, and surveyed the front page as he moved toward his house. Aunt Cassie's murder was still on the front page, along with Sheriff Foster's announcement that the GBI had identified suspects in the killing. "Yeah, right," Christopher said aloud. The sheriff had called

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the day before and Christopher had said, "We're looking at the inheritors." No revelation there. That's always who you looked at first. But the sheriff was an elected official. Christopher knew brains and politicians didn't often go together.

He heard a familiar panting behind him. Sam was there, front legs crouched and staring at a deflated basketball. Sam wasn't particular about his toys. Christopher found a spot lacking slobber, threw the ball, moved to his front porch, and sat.

Moments later, Sam tossed the misshapen basketball on the edge of the porch, but Christopher ignored it. He was flipping through his notebook again, thinking about motives. Greed was the predominant one, but there were others—jealousy, revenge, power. Knowing the motive often leads to the killer. Christopher knew that.

And there was a limited cast. Somebody unlocked that window from the inside. The wiped lock proved that.

He flipped a page in his notebook. A word was there, separated from the others. "Toastmasters." Why had he written that? Then he remembered.

Something hit his foot. He looked down at Sam's basketball. It was now glistening all over. Sam was two feet away, staring at the ball, wagging his tail slightly. Ignoring the slobber, Christopher grabbed the ball, stood, and threw it hard. The Lab jumped back, then leapt off the porch in search of his prize. Christopher hollered, "Sam, you belong in a kennel for crazies!"

Christopher leaned against a porch post and watched Sam hunt for the ball, which was hidden among the azaleas.

Crazy.

That's another motive. The hardest one of all.

Crazy.

But even with crazies, there was always some rational basis. It was just harder to find. Greed was so much easier. Christopher flipped through his notebook again with a new focus. Nurse Joanie, Liz, Jimmy, Jimmy's wife—a consistent thread throughout.

Crazy.

Click, click, click.

A moment of clarity.

When Sam returned, Christopher was gone. He was inside making phone calls.

"Would you like some chocolate chip cookies, Mr. Peckham? They're just out of the oven."

Christopher shook his head. "No, ma'am."

Phyllis Blackstone sat on the sofa. "Please, have a seat."

Christopher didn't sit. He moved to one of the display cases lining the living room wall. "Mrs. Blackstone, my favorite uncle, Uncle Bob, was in the Toastmasters club up in Knoxville."

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Mrs. Blackstone smiled. "How nice. I've been quite involved with the Toastmasters."

Christopher moved to another display case. "Yes, I know." He turned toward Mrs. Blackstone. "Uncle Bob was the president of his club for a time. I remember it quite well. I used to go up there for a week during the summer. One of my favorite things was Aunt Peg's cookies."

"Are you sure you don't want one of mine?"

Christopher contemplated the renewed offer. He was certain he was right, but, as yet, had no hard evidence. He was fishing here, hoping to startle Phyllis Blackstone into saying something incriminating. When dealing with amateurs, he'd found that to be effective. Maybe eating a cookie would help.

"They're still warm."

Christopher made his decision. Stick to business. "No, thank you, ma'am. I know it sounds kind of silly, but my other favorite thing was playing with Uncle Bob's gavel." Christopher sat on the edge of a chair, his elbows resting on his knees. "At the end of Uncle Bob's term as president, the club presented him with a gavel, and he kept it on a shelf. They had no children, so they had no toys. I played with what was available." He stood and moved to another collection of memorabilia. "I have come to understand that's not unusual for the Toastmasters. The gavel is a symbol of appreciation for your service."

Phyllis Blackstone stared at Christopher's back.

"I talked to William Hamilton. I found his name in the listing of clubs in the newspaper. He told me all about the gavel they gave you upon the completion of your tenure as president of the Toastmasters club. I called the manufacturer and got the dimensions. I was wondering if you could show it to me." Christopher turned and looked at her.

A moment passed. "I'm not sure where it is at the moment."

In other circumstances, Christopher would have smiled. He enjoyed nailing greedy people, power-hungry people, nasty people. He wasn't enjoying this. He waved toward the display cases. "Mrs. Blackstone, I have just seen a napkin from your high school's promenade in nineteen thirty-six. I have seen a program from your presentation at the Retired Eastern Pilots Association which was held a month ago. And you don't know where your gavel is? The special one that was oversized and made of iron, in honor of the nickname the club bestowed on you?"

"Well . . ."

"We'll find it, Mrs. Blackstone. A team's searching the river next to the nursing home as we speak. If it's not there, it'll be somewhere."

"What?"

Christopher looked into her eyes, his expression penetrating and sure.

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She stood and moved to a window facing the fields. "I'm scared. I want Ted."

"Agent Shafer is with your husband."

"I'm here, darling."

Christopher turned and watched Ted Blackstone move across the room to his wife. Harry followed and stopped next to Christopher. "How long have y'all been here?" Christopher asked.

"Long enough," Harry said. "After I talked to him, I would've had to shoot him to stop him. Didn't want to do that."

Ted was holding his wife, stroking her hair. "There, there," he said.

"Oh, Ted, they think I . . ."

"I know, sweetheart. There, there." Ted raised his face from his wife's shoulder and spoke toward the window. "I buried that damned gavel with the garbage. She kept staring at it, trying to remember the ceremony when she received it. But she couldn't. That was when she had the attack. It was driving her crazy. I couldn't stand it, so I got rid of it."

Christopher said, "Mr. Blackstone, we'll find it. I have to tell your wife about her rights. . . ."

"No! You still don't understand!" Ted took his wife by her shoulders and gently moved her to a chair. He moved to Christopher, took him by the elbow, and led him toward the back door. "Stay with her," Christopher said to Harry.

The two were on the back porch. Ted said, "We took care of Phyllis's mother, you know."

Christopher looked at him without expression.

"It was . . . difficult. For months and months before she passed away, her own mother didn't know who Phyllis was. Do you know what that's like?"

Christopher nodded. "It's hard, but . . ."

" 'Hard' ain't even close. A month later, Phyllis had her attack. For two days, she didn't even know who I was. She recovered, thank God; then Aunt Cassie came. Same thing. Just like her mother. Alive, but dead just the same. Phyllis is convinced that'll happen to her. It's driving her crazy. She kept staring at that damned gavel."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Blackstone, but I don't buy it. The court might, but I don't. I had a hunch and came over here, and now I'm more convinced than ever. Your wife can't kill somebody with impunity because she's afraid of having a stroke. She needs help, but she can't do that."

Ted leaned against the porch wall and slid down. "You still don't understand. Phyllis didn't kill her aunt. I did."

A moment passed, then Christopher said, "A noble gesture, Mr. Blackstone."

Ted's eyes moved to Christopher's. "I couldn't stand it—watching Phyllis slowly . . . deteriorate. I wanted to get her back to what she was. We've been married fifty-three years, Mr. Peckham. All of them

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wonderful. I love her more than anything. But after her attack, she became obsessed about having a stroke. And then Aunt Cassie had hers. She wasn't anything anymore, but Phyllis is a vibrant, sane person. I couldn't lose that. Every time we'd go over there, Phyllis would get worse. I kept telling her we didn't have to go. Cassie didn't know the difference. But Phyllis insisted. She wasn't going to abandon her aunt. I couldn't stand what was happening to her, and we have such little time left. I had to do something to stop it and I did."

Christopher's conviction about Mrs. Blackstone's guilt was wavering, but he wasn't convinced. "I know you love your wife, but we'll have to go with the evidence. I'm sorry, but when we find the gavel, we'll have it."

Ted looked up. "I hoped you'd assume hit-and-run. I got her all dressed up like she always was when she went to the cemetery. I never dreamed you'd accuse Phyllis. That damned gavel. I'll show you where it's buried. You'll find nothing on it but rotten food. And I'll give you my hammer. It's right out there in the barn. I couldn't bury it. It was my daddy's engineer's hammer. It meant too much to me. Even bought one for Jimmy."

Click, click, click.

That's when Christopher knew Ted was telling the truth.

Christopher took his iced tea from the dinner table to the front porch. He sat and immediately heard the familiar tapping of feet down his driveway. Sam tossed a beheaded rag doll at Christopher's feet.

Christopher leaned forward and stared at Sam. The dog's eyes were focused on the doll. Christopher grabbed the doll and waved it back and forth. The Lab's head moved, following Christopher's hand. He stood and threw the doll as hard as he could. Sam yelped and leapt off the porch.

Christopher moved to his door, then stopped and turned. Sam was bounding back toward him. Christopher sighed, waited for Sam, then picked up the soggy doll and said, "Crazy dog." He threw it again, hard.

As Sam ran to it, Christopher said softly, "There, there." ●

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Better to Forget

by Susan Moody

The current president of the International Association of Crime Writers, and a past chairman of the Crime Writers Association (U.K.), Susan Moody is regarded as a leading writer of suspense and mystery fiction. In addition to her two mystery series, featuring amateur sleuths Penny Wanawake and Cassie Swann, the author has produced bestselling thrillers and even a sequel (for adults) to Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, (*Misselthwaite*, 1998).

She flits like a moth behind the windows of the house, pulling the shutters closed in the green dusk. From my chair under the walnut tree, I watch the flutter of her progress, room by room, from the big salon, through the kitchen and dining room, and then, one after another, to the bedrooms.

Who is she?

Who am I?

Why are we here?

This not remembering is terrible to me.

She says I have lost my memory but if that is truly so, how can I then remember that I have forgotten? How can I be aware of my past, waiting, weighted, full of incidents, memories, all the separate pieces of time which make up the *me*-ness of me? How can I find it again, that past? Why did I lose it?

She is on the top floor now, in the long, low attic room which stretches right across the house. The attic lies under curving beams which hold up the roof, arching across the pale plaster. The interstices where wood meets wood, touches, intersects, and continues are netted with cobwebs. Not the intricate circular miracles I remember (I *remember!)* from another time, but sticky, clinging, decorated with the fragile wings of insects: moth, butterfly, bee, even a dragonfly which hangs suspended, its long body somehow enlarged by the perpetual twilight under the roof.

As the last shutter encloses the room behind it, the house stands neatly packaged, pink and grey in the dusk, safe for one more night. But am *I* safe?

Why am I here?

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Who is she?

Mothlike, she moves between the rooms, touching tables, the backs of chairs, the brass locks on the wardrobes. Her long fingers caress dried grasses, tall vases, bowls. Her dresses are pale, gauzy, the colours of insect wings. When I ask why we are here, she smiles, she puts her head, clouded with rich dark hair, on one side and shakes it gently. She rarely speaks. Sometimes she passes my chair and lays a hand softly on my shoulder, as though anxious not to disturb my passage from the now we currently occupy to the past I cannot recall.

I am obsessed by that lost distance. I hover in the present, robbed of dimension. I have no past because I have, somehow, mislaid it, no future because I now have no experience on which to build one. Yet, as I think this, I wonder how I can make use of words like *dimension, future, distance,* if my memory has gone.

Her hair hangs round her face like a cloud of butterflies. It is the most stated thing about her, the most positive. Is she guardian, jailer, nurse, companion? Is she mother, sister, daughter, aunt? Because I have asked her before, I know that if I asked again she would say she is self, *her*self; she would say she is no longer attached to others, she would say that is why we are here.

But you are attached to me, I cry, you must be, and she smiles at me, head inclined. I sit under the walnut tree and watch the land beyond the river curve gently out of the earth to meet copse, wood, lines of upright poplars. The fields are yellow, furred with the brown silk of maize or burned with dying, drying sunflowers which hang their scorched faces to the dry earth. The heat is intense. We sweat, our faces damp, the skin at wrist and knee shining with moisture. At the end of the garden the river runs, flat and brown, flat and green. It is so hot that the tall poplars, the willows, the laden fruit trees exist behind a shimmering haze, not quite defined.

So do I.

In the room above the living room, there are gaps between the floorboards. I can see her down there, seated at the table, her head resting on her hand. She is reading a newspaper. She sighs, lifting the heavy hair from her neck. If I too could read the words, I know I would find my past and thus regain my future, but from here I can see nothing and when I go downstairs, the newspaper is gone.

Who am I?

I want myself back. I am foetal, marooned in the present, pastless and futureless. Unmarked and yet marked. I look into the dim green mirrors and see that the past has written itself on my face. If only I could read what it says.

Each evening she calls me through the twilight. At the top of the uneven steps of slippery cream stone which climb the side of the house to the first floor, she stands waiting, gauzed in ice-cream

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colours: white cotton, pink lawn, green silk. Except for her strong black hair, I can hardly see her as she waits for me to come to her across the warm grass. I imagine sometimes, as I lie in bed while the insects dance unseen about me, that her hair is like a cobweb, full of struggling wings.

Above us as we drink soup, cut meat, pass vegetables, nip at cheese or bread, I can hear the rooms settling and sighing, their wooden floors creaking under the weightless feet of ghosts. But whose ghosts? Whose house is this?

Why are we here?

Tonight, the soup is made from tomatoes. I picked them for her earlier, liking the feel of the plump fruit in my hands, the contrast between their fleshy redness and the yellowed leaves among which they hang. Yet now, looking down at the bowl, I cannot eat. The soup reminds me—if I can use such a word when I have no memories to recall—of something I do not wish to remember. It sits in front of me like—like . . .

I raise my eyes and she is looking at me, head on one side, smiling. She tells me to eat and I put my spoon into the red liquid. There are circles of oil on the surface, golden in the light from the lamp. I can see onion floating under the surface, like peeled skin, translucent, softly ribbed, the way insect wings are ribbed.

Eat, she tells me. Eat. It's good.

What language are we speaking? Is it my own or one which is so familiar to me that it seems my own?

Is it hers?

Eat, she says again, but I cannot. I push the bowl away from me.

She brings meat, the lines of the grill black across its surface. She brings a flat dish of waxy beans with butter melting into the nest of their intersecting lengths. Red soup, yellow beans, the charred animal flesh—I stare at her. Am I child or adult? How can I know that such states as childhood or maturity exist if I have no past? How can I have retained a vocabulary, kept the skeleton of words and concepts, yet lost the images which flesh them out and turn them into memories?

I stand sometimes in the attic room and look out at the garden. It runs down to the river past trees, bushes, a vegetable patch. She walks between raspberry canes, wearing a flat straw hat. She carries a basket in which to imprison the beans, the tomatoes, the plums with which the garden is so bountiful. There is a greengage tree at the edge of the grass, its fruit mothed with grey bloom. If I pick one, there is yellow under the green skin, and when I bite into it, the stone at its heart is red.

She is falling, the cream steps slippery under her sandals. She looks up at me as I hurry across the grass to help her to her feet.

My ankle, she says, leaning on me. The shopping. You will have to

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go into the village, she says. The *boulangerie,* the *boucherie.* You understand? The baker. The butcher.

Butcher, butcher—the word clangs in my head like a bell, resounding through the cobwebbed caverns of my brain.

Butcher . . .

I take a basket and walk down the white road. The word hangs in front of me as though I am reading it from a newspaper headline. A plump word, rounded, full of blood.

Butcher.

Butchered.

I buy sticks of bread, a plum tart, croissants. I buy onions. I stand waiting in front of a glass counter. Behind it are steel dishes of organs: livers, kidneys, sweetbreads. Yellow fat. Dark blood. Cobwebs of white tissue. I push my way out of the shop and stand trembling on the narrow pavement. They remind me of—of . . .

You forgot to go to the butcher, she says, when I return to the house. She puts her head on one side and smiles at me. I stare at her and after a while, she looks away.

This evening there is more soup made from the last of the tomatoes but this time she has disguised it with cream. I spoon it into my mouth and think: *We have done this before, she and I: This house, these rooms, are not just the present but the past as well.*

The lamp in the living room is on but she has forgotten to close the shutters. Tonight she is wearing a dress the colour of air. Moths flutter round the circle of light, their wings bumping softly against the shade. I lie on the floor in the greengage twilight and spy on her from above. She is reading again. Another newspaper. Different words. She moves her clouded hair and I read a headline. HUNT SHIFTS TO—What does it mean? My foot scrapes across the dusty boards and she looks up sharply, her face white. She calls my name, but I do not answer and after a while she limps across to the hearth, where she strikes a match and sets fire to the paper.

I watch her from the window of the attic. She lies in the garden under the walnut tree. Her eyes are closed. Softly I come down the creaking wooden stairs and go into the kitchen. She has been preparing more of the yellow beans. They lie drowning in a pan. Beside the chopping board waits a knife with a black handle. I pick it up and feel the weight of it, the balance. Light gleams along the blade and present dissolves for a moment into the past.

Where?

Why?

I stab the knife into the table. If only I could remember. If only I could bring it back. When I turn, she is standing in the doorway, watching me. She does not smile.

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She says there will be rain tonight. Behind the poplar trees, the sky is the colour of greengages. Wind rattles among the stalks of maize. Under the plum trees, the ground is purple with fallen fruits. She moves between the raspberry canes, picking the last of the berries. Brown leaves fly about her head like moths and I know, without knowing how, that the summer is ending, that it has ended in this house, this garden, many times before, that I have been here, part of it.

Tires crunch behind the house. People. Go inside, she says. Go upstairs. Her voice is not quite calm.

In the room over the living room, my heart pumps. I lie and listen. I watch them between the floorboards. Two men, both wearing white shirts and jackets, although heat still hangs heavy in the house. There is sweat on their foreheads; their wrists shine with it.

They speak in low voices, as though they do not wish to be overheard.

Caught up with you at last, they say. Cooperation. French police. Afraid we shall have to—

She says: You didn't know him. What he did to us. What he did. You don't understand.

Tell us, they say.

This house was the only place, she says. He tried to destroy it, to destroy everything. She begins to weep. You don't know what it was like. I'm not excusing anything, she says, and tears drop onto the backs of her sunburned hands. Her hair droops darkly over her face.

That room, one of them says. A slaughterhouse. Butchered. Like an animal.

That's what he was, she says. It's what he deserved.

Blood, one of them says. Everywhere. Blood and . . . other things. Butchered.

This house, she says. My refuge. It was all I had. I didn't know what else to do, she says.

She is lying. All my life she has known what to do.

Who did it? they say. Which one used the knife?

She shakes her head. What it was like, she says.

You'll both have to come, they say. Back with us. Home to England.

She says: It's not our home. It never was.

They stand. They look up at the ceiling. Up at me. I hear them slowly climbing the stairs and think that if I could only get back my past, I would be able to change the future. But I am caught in the overwhelming present. As the feet come nearer to where I wait beneath the cobwebs and the trapped insects, rain begins to fall. I hear it beating on the roof and against the shutters. I hear it falling down the chimney onto the hearth. Outside, the leaves of the plum tree and the greengage clatter against each other and the sunflowers clash like cymbals. Footsteps boom along the passage.

Perhaps it would be better not to remember. ●

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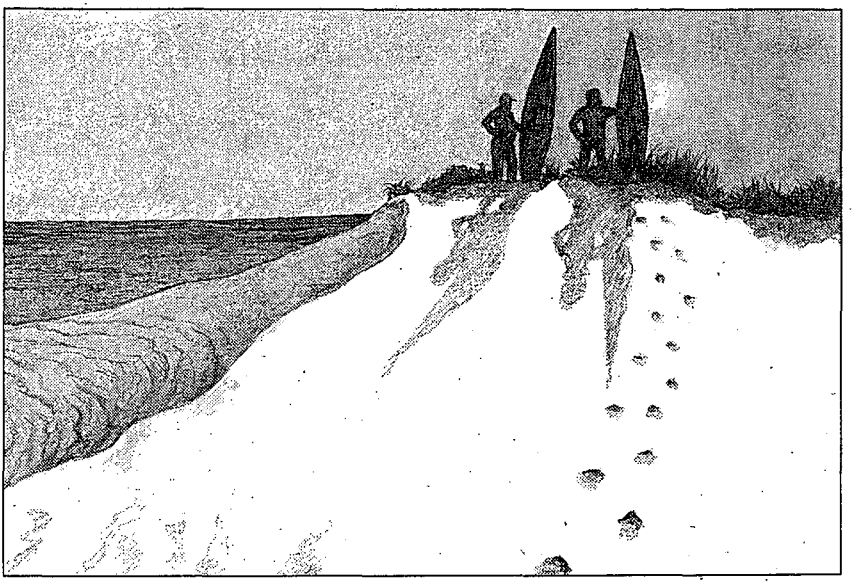

Art by Shirley Unan

The Ozone Layer

by Jim Allyn

"I thought my search for love was over," she said quietly. "God, we got along so great." She was sitting at the kitchen table in the spring sunlight wearing a light blue threadbare cotton robe and sipping a cup of coffee. The hem of her robe was soaked dark with blood. It had dragged a trail across the beige carpet from the body to the table. She looked at Howard. "I really loved him, you know." She returned her gaze to the chipped cup before her. "But he drank. And when he drank, he was different. Mean. Ever know anyone like that?"

Something in her face distracted Howard for an instant. A beauty, a passion beneath that gray, ageing-smoker's skin. A tiny pink bow held her thinning salt-and-pepper ponytail in place.

"Lots," he said.

"I got so angry, I mean, I really thought my search for love was over. 'Janet,' he'd say, 'it's me and you, baby, all the way.' I didn't want to hurt him. But he turned out to be mean."

"How long had you known him?" Howard asked, keeping his eyes on the gun near her right hand. It was a small nickel-plated Colt Detective revolver, .32 or .38, out of production for years. He thought

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it was no accident that she lifted and sipped with her left hand, then would set the cup down and take a drag from her cigarette with that same hand, her right hand never straying even a little bit away from the gun.

"Three or four months, I guess."

"I'm sure people will understand, Janet. He was beating you."

She turned furious eyes on him, her voice rising, shrill. "He wasn't beating me. I never said that. Roy loved me."

"Oh, oh, sorry. I mean, you said he was mean when he drank. I just assumed . . ."

"No, he wasn't mean that way. He would watch TV."

"Yeah . . . watch TV. Sure."

"He'd come home from work, pour himself one big drink, plop down on the floor, and lay there and watch TV. Every night. Like clockwork. He'd sip that drink till bedtime. First he'd watch the news. And then whatever was on after that. Didn't matter."

"Did he ever drink more than that?"

"Naw. Oh, on Saturdays he might have two. Wouldn't drink on Sunday. Said the Lord didn't like it. Sometimes he'd go fifteen minutes without saying a word to me. And us fresh in love and all. . . . You know that ozone layer?"

"Sure."

"You know it's made out of our souls? Ever since we started sendin' stuff up there that eats it up, the world's been going to hell. Every time someone dies, their soul goes back up there, and every time someone's born, their soul comes from there. It's some kind of energy. I think it's really bad that it's being eaten up. Pretty soon we won't have no souls. None of us. . . . Poor Roy. I thought my search for love was over."

Before he could even consider what to do next, he heard the siren. Her head lifted slightly and he knew she'd heard it, too.

Howard threw a face-first body block into the rickety wooden table, breaking all its legs and sending Janet crashing into the wall. He caught the gun in both hands before it hit the floor. It was all he cared about. Getting the gun away from her and getting out of that kitchen alive. His face was buried in her warm soft chest, her robe reeking of cheap perfume and sour sweat, old booze and old smoke.

A VP for marketing and community relations at Elkhart General Hospital in Elkhart, Indiana, Jim Allyn has a busy work schedule and little time for fiction writing. Even so, he's managed to sell every story he's penned—all to *EQMM*. This third tale for us, set in the Indiana Dunes State Park, is atmospheric and thoughtful and contains a character we could easily see as the protagonist of a novel—if Mr. Allyn should find time to write one! ¶

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She was motionless. Even though he was breathing hard, he was conscious of her beating heart. He got shakily to his feet. His pant leg was torn from the sawtooth edge of a broken table leg. He heard the prowler crunch to a stop on the gravel driveway. He glanced at his watch: 8:15 A.M. So he'd stepped into a murder before his second cup of coffee. One dead body in the middle of the living room. One drunken murderer out cold on the kitchen floor. He flipped open the chamber of the Colt. All five rounds had found a home in Roy What's-his-name, who liked to watch TV a little too much for Janet What's-her-name.

Howard figured his vacation was starting none too soon.

He was in Assistant Chief Sally Painter's office, bringing her up to date on two breaking cases before he took off for two weeks. She was sitting behind her desk, a small athletic woman with short blond hair. She looked friendly but authoritative in her gray business suit. She started out awkwardly as he was arranging his notes, getting ready to leave.

"Jim, that lady . . . Janet Barnes . . . she didn't make it. The paramedics, the doctors, everybody thought she was just drunk and got knocked out when the table went over. Mild concussion, maybe. They were letting her sleep it off in detox on the Psych Unit. Then she coded in the middle of the night. Turns out something had happened to her neck. . . . She never woke up."

Howard remembered the sound of the old woman's beating heart. He gripped the sides of his chair hard. His chin went into his chest. He straightened up slowly, holding onto the chair as if he were aboard a storm-tossed ship.

"She kept her right hand by the gun the whole time, Sal."

"I know. It's in your report."

Howard exhaled long. "Do I have to hang around?"

"Oh, no. No, not at all. This doesn't change anything. You never drew your weapon and you never struck her. You were just trying to separate her from the gun."

"She heard the sirens. I could tell. I thought she was going to do something."

"There's no question of misuse of deadly force here, Jim. I just thought you should know what happened to her." She started to say something else, but looked at his hunched body, and instead came around the desk and put a gentle hand on the back of his tensed neck. "Now come on, let's get you on vacation. I'll walk you down."

Coming down the stairs, they saw a group of officers gassing by the coffee machine. She took Howard by the arm, trying to steer him away, but by the way they looked at him he knew he was somehow the object of their guffaws. He pulled away from Painter and headed toward them. "Hey, what's up?"

"We were just talking about your brush with death at the hand of

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Ma Barker. We thought you did a great job of staying on her good side." They all laughed.

Painter looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Yeah, well, she wasn't exactly Ma Barker, but she had a gun all right," Howard said.

"Unloaded."

"Like I'm supposed to know that."

"Bet you were sweating bullets waiting for her move. Gun right there, an inch from her right hand."

Howard smiled uncertainly. "She could have grabbed it easily. You bet I was nervous."

They all laughed, clearly enjoying his obvious confusion.

"All right, what the hell is going on? Go ahead, take your shot, whatever it is," Howard said, finally irritated.

"She was a crip, Howard," one of them said. "Paralyzed on her right side. Had been for years. Her walker was in the bedroom." They broke up again, imagining the scene of a paralyzed drunk with an empty gun keeping one of their toughest cops at bay. "If you'da got there a few minutes earlier, you would have seen her on all fours crawling to the table. You could have sat on her until reinforcements arrived." They laughed again.

Howard looked at Painter for confirmation. She shrugged. "How could you know? Near as we could tell, the guy fell asleep on the floor watching TV and she crawled up to him and popped him right there on the floor, point blank. There were powder burns right into his skin. Then she crawled over to the table. She was an invalid, Jim. Could barely get around."

Howard's face was blank. "I'll see you in a couple of weeks," he told them all. He knew there was no malice in their humor. Still, he couldn't wait to get away from them.

"Hey, Howard," someone hooted after him. "This one only counts as half a bust."

They were on the steps outside. Painter saw the turquoise kayak on the roof of Howard's dark green jeep.

"Going over to the dunes?" she asked.

"Yeah. Want to catch the surf from the spring storms."

"God, Jim, that place is deserted this time of year. You ought to go where there're some people having a good time."

"I was just at a place where some people were having a good time," Howard said.

He was approaching the Michigan border on I-65 when Janet tried to speak to him. He hushed her and explained to her how it worked. He didn't allow them to speak, the Janets and Roys he had dealt with. There were too many and what would be the point? He didn't repress them. He let them fill the back rows of his memory and occasionally he would pan across their faces, remembering them, acknowledging

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them. But he didn't let them speak because they were all waiting to speak and he knew if he let them really get going he would not be able to shut them up and his life would be over. So they had developed this understanding: Yes, I see you. Yes, you are important. You get to sit quietly in the back rows and share in my life as it unfolds. You are not dead, gone, and forgotten. But you must be silent partners. Otherwise, no deal, and I will clear the auditorium. After a few tries, Janet would understand and take her seat with the rest.

He liked Michiana, this no-nonsense region where Northern Indiana merged with Southern Michigan. Hard-working, straight-ahead people. David Letterman's friendly sarcasm about the hickness of his home state definitely applied to Michiana generally, and that was okay with Howard. The criminals and their crimes tended to be garden variety, often deadly but rarely as sordid as crimes on the coasts. Lightly regulated, Indiana let cops concentrate on police work. It was this heartland flavor and the nearness of the St. Joseph River snaking its way to Lake Michigan that drew Howard from law enforcement in landlocked Missouri. In summer he could be in shorts and paddling along with the current of this big river within minutes of being off duty. Or he could choose to ply the waves of the big lake and relax at the huge duneland parks that were less than an hour away from South Bend.

Self-sufficient and free. That was how he always felt when heading for the lake with his Jeep loaded with gear and his kayak lashed to its roof like a turquoise banana. Through the tiny burgs of Mottville and Constantine and Edwardsburg with their churches and courthouses, past cornfields, now and again crossing a loop of the St. Joseph.

He entered Warren Dunes state park, not slowing for the guard shack—it would be empty until the official opening on Memorial Day. He parked in the gigantic expanse of paved lot, the size of several football fields to accommodate the summer hordes. Fewer than a dozen vehicles were scattered about. Despite its size, the parking lot was dwarfed by the huge semicircle of sand mountains blocking the way to Lake Michigan. From the lush Michiana farms and woodlands, he was now in a landscape reminiscent of the Sahara.

A well-balanced seventeen feet, fifty-seven pounds of almost indestructible molded fiberglass, Howard's kayak was easy for him to load and unload. He stowed a few necessities in its watertight bulkheads fore and aft, just enough for the night, pulled and jerked and swore his way into his wet suit, locked up his Jeep, took the bowline in both hands, and began dragging the boat up the dune. He liked the physical strain of it, his bare feet sinking into the warm sand and the lazy April sun lightly toasting his sleeveless Farmer John neoprene skin. Sweating and breathing hard, he rested at the summit. Sitting on the boat's bow, he surveyed the majesty of the dunes. Children of the Pleistocene Ice Age, comprised of countless tons of

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glittering, glacier-ground grains of quartz, the dunes formed the shoreline of an equally majestic and glittering sweetwater sea stretching to the horizon. A contradictory world: a strip of desert embracing the largest freshwater resource in the world. It was the fierce teamwork of the relentless west wind and the pounding waves that made it—and kept it—that way, denying life completely for a small stretch, then minimizing life inland until a few tough grasses and shrubs and finally the indestructible cottonwoods found spots to hang on. And Howard loved it.

He jogged down the dune, the kayak gliding eagerly behind. He reached the beach, screwed together the twin ends of his double-bladed paddle, decided against a spray skirt because of the diminutive waves, nosed his bow into the water, climbed into the cockpit, and with the strength of his arms alone pushed out into the cold Lake Michigan water, half man and half boat.

Within minutes of rhythmic paddling he was a half-mile out. Sitting quietly, rocking gently, along the horizon he could see a few yachts deep fishing for chinook and coho. The beach itself looked entirely devoid of human life. He decided to do an easy paddle across to Weko Beach and then return to Warren Dunes for the night.

He was snug in his sleeping bag on the lee side of his kayak when he awoke at dawn to the crashing of the waves. The wind was up, the leftover wrath of spring storms far out over the lake. This would be a different kind of kayaking, the kind where the waves brook no mistake. He would make a little fire from the small sticks of fatwood he carried, burn his throat with coffee, then take them on.

He was huddled with his cup when a figure appeared at the top of a dune, dragging a blaze-red kayak and heading down toward him. He watched the figure approach, not minding the prospect of an experienced companion on rough waters but simultaneously figuring how he would gently blow off the unwanted baggage of a greenhorn tourist kayaker.

But this was no tourist. He descended the dune gracefully, which took strength in the soft, pulling sand. As he neared, Howard saw what looked for all the world like a pirate. Tall and straight, the man had a full black beard and a long ponytail that whipped about in the wind. Two large gold earrings sparkled in the morning sun. He was well muscled beneath his wet suit and his kayak was an old warrior, marred and scraped from battles with river rocks and gravel beaches. He stopped before Howard. He did not extend his hand and Howard did not offer his. Howard put him in his early forties. He noticed primitive tattoos on both his forearms, the kind that usually meant gangs or prison or both.

"Mind some company?" the pirate asked, not the least bit winded from his trek.

"You know the first rule," Howard said.

The pirate nodded. "The rule we all have to break if we really want

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to spend time on the water: Never kayak alone." He turned his attention to his gear. "Name's Greg Cash. What were your plans?"

"Jim Howard. I was just going to finish my coffee and head out. I like to zigzag the breakers. You up for that?"

"Sure am." He produced a cup from his kit. "Got some more of that?"

They sipped their coffee and briefly compared notes. Cash was a diesel mechanic and had lived and worked in South Bend all his life. He was rough-hewn and seemed capable, if hard-eyed and watchful. All in all, Howard thought he could have done a lot worse for an accidental fellow-traveler. He had no doubt Cash would be handy if a capsize got dicey in the heaving waves. The waves that capsize you don't go away and can make reentering your boat or reaching the shore hard as hell.

They positioned their kayaks at the edge of the rolling surf, strapped themselves into their spray-skirt harnesses, slid into the cockpits, and sealed the strong elastic hem of the skirt to the grooved lip of the cockpit. Now man and boat were truly a single watertight entity . . . unless the skirt pulled loose. Then the waves would swamp them in nothing flat.

They sat parallel in the thinning waters of the upper beach, ready to take on the big breakers. It was always a daunting moment. What you've got is the strength of your back and arms, your seaman's wits, and a little hollow boat. And it seems like damn little as you sit there before the awesome power of an enraged lake. Howard wore a polypropylene helmet, not so much for protection as for the battle-ready way it made him feel. Cash remained bareheaded and had undone his ponytail, his hair streaming behind him in the rushing wind. They glanced at each other. Invisible grains of sand stung their bare arms and faces. They would find something out about the other now. Especially if one of them lost it and wound up in the forty-five-degree water that drained your strength in fifteen or twenty minutes, wet suit or not.

With all the forward momentum their arms could muster, they moved like attacking beetles from sand to surf, instantly grabbing their paddles and stabbing at the avalanches of water, fighting to stay bowfirst against a surging fluid onslaught that wanted to turn them sideways. The water would use even the slightest veer to turn the entire craft sideways, flip it, and keep on flipping it until it dumped it on the upper beach. The waves crashed over them, filling their mouths and noses. Then they would slice up a frothy crest and point skyward, only to shoot down again into a trough, then up again as the wild ride was repeated. There was no time to gauge the other. All energy and attention was fixed upon staying straight and moving ahead. After constant, frenzied action, they were through the breakers and into the huge swells that were dangerous only if you got really sloppy. Cash pumped his paddle at Howard, a victory salute,

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then wheeled to ride the big waves beachward, back-paddling on the crests and paddling forward in the lulls, until he was in the last set before the beach. And then Howard caught his breath. Cash turned parallel to a breaker and deftly paddled into its curl, his craft shooting through it like a surfboard and exiting just before it unloaded on the beach. Howard couldn't do that. He would never be able to do that. Cash was an ace.

Howard stayed with his straight-at-the-beach and straight-out approach, exhilarating in the din and chaos. Cash kept working the tubes. Howard saw him capsize twice, each time instantaneously executing an expert Eskimo roll to right himself. Howard involuntarily whooped in delight both times. Watching someone work a boat so skillfully under such extreme conditions was a sight to behold.

They broke midmorning for more coffee and a quick, chilly nap, then went right back at it. Waves this size generated a sense of urgency; they were a singular rite of spring, rarely recreated even by the worst storms of summer.

Towards evening Howard was spent. He nestled in the swells beyond the breakers, watching Cash do his thing in the surf. Howard's back and arms were sore, and he was starting to stiffen up. He didn't notice how close he was drifting to rough water until one of the whitecaps materialized into a breaker behind him and broke over his boat, turning him sideways. The next one ignored his frantic paddling, effortlessly turned him over, and in that same instant hurled him into the air.

Beneath the waves, shocking cold and deadly quiet. No crashing breakers here. Inverted, Howard tore at the strap that would release the spray skirt from the cockpit. He found it, jerked, and dropped free, clawing for the surface. He came up gasping just as a wave crashed down. Again he found himself down deep in the frigid water. This far out and this tired, Howard knew his wet suit might not keep hypothermia at bay long enough for him to make the beach. Once again he bobbed to the surface. He could see Cash. He looked like he was simply riding the waves, watching him, making no effort to reach him. Howard yelled, was rolled by a wave. This time when he resurfaced Cash was racing toward him. He positioned his boat near Howard but too far for him to reach.

"Get your ass over here," Howard shouted.

They rose and fell together with every wave. Cash gazed at Howard, seemed to decide something, then quickly paddled over so Howard could grab his stern.

"You hurt?" Cash yelled.

"No. Freezing."

Staying straight and letting the waves do the work, Cash towed Howard toward shore. Soon it was shallow enough for Howard to stagger toward the beach, a wave occasionally knocking him over. Cash returned to catch Howard's kayak, now ponderous and slow

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from the eight hundred pounds of water it contained.

Shivering, exhausted, Howard found his way to their cache of gear and crawled into his sleeping bag. Cash built a roaring driftwood fire, then returned to Howard's kayak. Heavy as a beached whale, the kayak could not be tipped over. He emptied it with a hand pump and dragged it to their makeshift camp.

Mummylike in his bag, Howard was trying to get warm and trying to stifle his anger at Cash. Sometimes emergencies go slo-mo, and it could be Cash never hesitated in helping him. That he only perceived it that way. He didn't want to judge him. He didn't even know him, and the guy had probably saved his life.

Howard watched as Cash unstrapped his waterproof pouch and dug inside it. With a smooth motion he produced a nickel-plated Colt Detective revolver. He dropped to his knees and held it sideways for Howard to inspect.

"Ever seen one of these?"

Howard's stomach tightened. He nodded. "Just the other day."

"There were two of these in my family. My dad bought one for himself and one for my mom. When he died, I got his. Ugly little bastard, isn't it? I don't think a gun should look like jewelry. It's kind of like painting the electric chair gold."

"Janet Barnes was your mom?"

"Yeah. Oh, she wasn't much of one. Drank too much. Mostly ignored me, ignored my dad. Her drinkin' and runnin' around sent him to an early grave. But for all that, she was my mom. And she was paralyzed." His eyes were hard on Howard's face.

Howard sat up, remaining tightly wrapped in his bag. "I was on my way to work about seven-thirty in the morning," he said softly. "Squawk box goes off. Reports a couple arguing about three blocks from where I'm at. We get these all the time. Morning domestics are usually nothing, tempers flaring when people are getting off to work, that sort of thing. Nothing was said about shots. So I head on over. I could see Janet at the table through the kitchen window. Everything seemed cool. She didn't come to the door when I knocked. I held my badge up to the window. Made sure she saw it, and then I went in. When I stepped into the kitchen I could see the body on the floor in the living room behind her. She had the gun at the table. I could see the blood trail on the carpet right up to her robe. So I stop by to calm a couple down and all of a sudden I'm in the middle of a murder. I had no way to know the gun was empty and she was paralyzed."

Cash seemed not to hear him. The fire crackled in the fitful wind. When he spoke, it was as if he was talking to himself. "She was one of those women you keep tryin' to reach. Everyone did. But the more she ignored you, the more you wanted to dance right in front of her and make her see you. No one could ever just give up on her and walk away. Damnedest thing. She went through four husbands." He got to his feet.

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Howard looked up at him. "You done time, Cash?"

"Almost three years. At Marion. It was a long, long time ago and I've been clean ever since." He cradled the revolver in his two rough hands.

"There was something about Janet that always tore me up," he went on. "I guess I was always hoping someday she'd be different." His voice caught. He cleared his throat and looked down at Howard through suddenly lost and tear-filled eyes. A five-year-old black-mopped pirate looking to his mother for validation of his existence and never getting it. "And now I know she'll always be what she always was and nothing more." He coughed, and looked out at the booming, unfurling waves.

"You know what she believed, my mother?"

"That the ozone layer is the stuff of human souls."

Cash's eyes opened wide. "Yeah. That's right."

"And because it's being depleted, eventually none of us will have any souls."

"Yeah. A world filled with billions of people without any souls. Hell, she'd fit right in. She killed Roy, but she could have killed any of them, I guess. So she treats me like a stranger from the time I'm a baby, and when she dies, I'm ready to throw my life away for her by killing a cop, and a white-water man at that."

Cash stood motionless for some minutes, staring at the gun in his hands. He glanced at Howard. "You don't think there's anything to it, do you? That ozone deal, I mean." He seemed embarrassed by the question.

"Not technically," Howard said.

With a very deliberate windup worthy of a Yankee reliever, Cash threw the Colt at the Lake Michigan breakers. It spun like a star, splashed into a whitecap, and was gone.

They were silent for a while, listening to the loud, tumultuous world around them.

"How long you been kayakin'?" Howard finally asked.

"Twenty years maybe."

"Knocking around these beaches that whole time?"

"Pretty much. I can only take the dunes in small doses this time of year, though. Too damn lonely."

"I've been bouncing around here for the last eight years," Howard said. "I imagine I was pretty easy to find."

"Like falling off a log. Actually, I'd seen your Jeep around town a few times. Always notice kayak rigs."

"Were you planning to come here to the dunes this weekend, uh, you know, anyway?"

"No. Next weekend. I've had next weekend planned for about three months."

They looked at each other in a bewildered kind of way, each trying to fathom the bizarre series of events that had brought them and

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their battered kayaks together at this moment, on this deserted beach below towering Michiana dunes.

Cash's grim face busted into a wide grin. "But now I'll get an extra week off. Bereavement time. And stalking you has turned out to be a real pleasure. Thank God you weren't a golfer. You might be dead." He tossed back that bearded head and howled with laughter, the laugh of a drunken Viking at a wake. Howard convulsed, unable to catch a breath he was laughing so hard. Still wrapped in his bag, he fell sideways on the sand and emitted little yipping sounds as he tried to breathe.

"Janet finally did something right," Cash stuttered, trying to rub his eyes dry, but laughing even more. "Listen," he finally managed, "I'm driving back to South Bend tonight. Funeral's in the morning. If there's five people there I'll be surprised. You ever paddled at Saugatuck?"

"No. Always meant to."

"Hell of a party town. Rich yachters, artist colony, that kind of crowd. How about you go back with me for the funeral, then we'll head over to Saugatuck for a few days. Plow those waves and plow those bars. Whattaya say?"

Howard thought for a moment. "Usually I like the beach empty like this. But right now a packed bar sounds pretty damn good."

"We'll see how the other half lives."

"I know how they live," Howard said. "They use newer guns and bleed on more expensive carpets. But let's go anyway."

Cash stirred the fire with a stick. The wind caught a handful of sparks and swirled them high into the leaden sky, an offering. ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine*, and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com.

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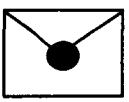

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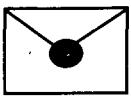

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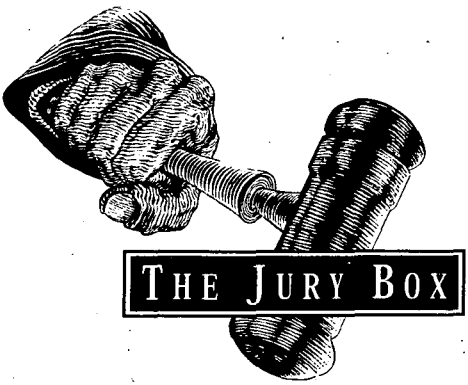

by Jon L. Breen

Your resident omniscient critic would love to claim catholic tastes, but the truth is, like any reader, I prefer certain kinds of crime fiction to others. Two of my favorite sub-categories, as careful readers will have figured out, are the courtroom novel and the historical mystery. Below are recent examples, starting with the work of a writer who combines features of both.

**** Anne Perry: *A Breach of Promise,* Fawcett Columbine, $25. Mid-nineteenth-century London barrister Sir Oliver Rathbone, who has taken on the seemingly hopeless defense of an architect sued for breach of promise, calls on amnesiac private detective William Monk and Nurse Hester Latterly for help. Perry is a great storyteller whose sure hand with plot, background, character, Victorian social commentary, and (in this series) even a touch of humor makes even her most minor work worth the reader's attention, and this is one of her best. The mid-book shocker is both genuinely surprising and fairly clued, and the feminist message is powerfully delivered. (Two mild caveats: the early stages seem even more leisurely than usual; and by now the repeated allusions to Hester's service in the Crimea must make more long-time readers than the two I know of groan with impatience.)

*** Graham Rawle: *Diary of an Amateur Photographer,* Penguin Studio, $19.95. The present-day type-written diary of repressed would-be photographer Michael Whittingham looks back on a 1950s murder case involving Britain's extraordinarily unerotic cheesecake photo-art magazines of that period. The layout, reproducing pages of the diary along with illustrations, has the look of one of those Mystery Dossiers Dennis Wheatley and others wrote in the thirties. Lest you wonder, this one-of-a-kind item by a well-known British artist and humorist really is a mystery, and the envelope taped inside the back cover really does hold a solution.

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*** William Bernhardt: *Dark Justice,* Ballantine, $22.50. Ben Kincaid's latest case is set in Washington's logging country, where the book-touring lawyer-turned-author takes on the defense of an eco-terrorist bomber accused of murder. The wondrously ornate plot climaxes like a fireworks display, with an exciting escape from sure death and multiple surprise revelations. The loose ends are tied up as neatly as in a Shakespearean comedy, though the final twist is far from comic. Bernhardt leaves no doubt which he believes are the good guys in the struggle between loggers and environmentalists.

*** Gus Lee: *No Physical Evidence,* Fawcett Columbine, $24.95. Joshua Jin, a burned-out and demoted deputy D.A. who lost a daughter to a fatal heart condition and a wife to divorce, returns to the courtrooms of Sacramento to prosecute the accused rapist-kidnapper of a thirteen-year-old girl—and as the title suggests, he must depend on the believability of the victim's testimony to make his case. Lee may pile on the miseries a little too freely—adding in a freaked-out Vietnam vet with stress disorder as Jin's investigator is a bit much—but the story is both deftly written and totally involving.

*** Larry Millett: *Sherlock Holmes and the Ice Palace Murders,* Viking, $23.95. Following the memorable *Sherlock Holmes and the Red Demon,* Holmes and Watson again leave Baker Street for 1890s Minnesota, where the St. Paul Winter Carnival is marked by a series of murders. The home-grown detective genius they encounter, Shadwell Rafferty, is an interesting enough character to be put in charge of some historical mysteries of his own. Among the story's delights are some fascinating details on the design and building of ice palaces. Of all the creators of ersatz-Holmes cases, Millett erects the most elaborate scholarly editorial apparatus: fifteen pages of notes! Though some readers (not me) may find that a bit excessive, the same meticulous sensibility is responsible for some of the best Golden-Age-style plotting and clueing extant.

** Christopher A. Leppek: *The Surrogate Assassin,* Write Way, 10555 E. Dartmouth, Suite 210, Aurora, CO 80014; $24.95. In the United States to look for a killer stalking famed actor Edwin Booth, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson also seek the real truth behind the assassination of Lincoln. Leppek makes good use of the historical background and has an ingenious story to tell, despite excessive length and a plot requiring a murderer of Wile E. Coyote-level incompetence. Anachronisms and solecisms undermine the enterprise: while it's barely possible Holmes might use the phrases "cultural shock" and "doing my homework," he would never say "the case . . . is afoot." Nor would Watson misuse the words "hopefully" and "thankfully" the way we do today or commit such

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grammatical blunders as "Morning found both Holmes and I refreshed . . ." or "more desperate than us." The long-winded epilogue might have been better devoted to telling us how much historical basis there is for the author's speculations.

** Ellis Cose: *The Best Defense*, HarperCollins, $24. A prominent journalist and non-fiction writer on race relations recounts the trial of a laid-off computer firm employee, a white male known as the "affirmative action" killer when he shoots (accidentally or on purpose?) a Hispanic colleague kept on in the name of diversity. This first novel starts slowly and recycles some lawyer novel clichés, including the old former-lovers-as-opposing-advocates ploy used to better effect by Gus Lee (see above), but it gathers momentum to its not-unforeseeable conclusion. This is no one-sided polemic. Though Cose himself favors affirmative action, his very sympathetic protagonist, African-American defense lawyer Felicia Fontaine, opposes it.

An impressive group of historical mystery specialists contribute original stories, chronologically arranged, to *Crime Through Time II* (Berkley, $6.99), edited by Miriam Grace Monfredo and Sharan Newman. Walter Satterthwait's lead-off story, cleverly titled "Murder One," recounts a stone-age murder. According to the introduction to a strong entry by John Maddox Roberts, who was doing Ancient Roman detective novels before either Steven Saylor or Lindsey Davis, his most recent books about Decius Caecilius Metellus have been published only in German. (American and British publishers, give us a break!) Along with an impressive array of well-known novelists is prominent fan and editor Elizabeth Foxwell, whose fine first story "Unsinkable" gets still more fictional mileage from the Titanic tragedy.

Janwillem van de Wetering's biography of a fellow Dutch mystery novelist, *Robert van Gulik: His Life and Work* (Soho, $12), was previously available only in a 1987 edition limited to 350 copies. Fans of both writers will want it, though its brevity and the inclusion of tangential material on Chinese law and religion may frustrate some. Collectors should note that Arthur P. Yin's introduction, a good appreciation of van Gulik's Judge Dee mysteries, is original to this edition.

If you love train mysteries as much as I do, hop on the Trans-Australia Railway in the recently-reprinted *Great Black Kanba* (Rue Morgue, 946 Pearl Street, P.O. Box 4119, Boulder, CO 80302; $14), a fast and funny 1944 novel by the talented team of Constance and Gwenyth Little. The back-cover blurb has a creative line: "call it Cornell Woolrich on laughing gas. . . ." Promising eventual reprint of all twenty-one Little mysteries, the publisher has *The Black Honeymoon* (1944) and *The Black Gloves* (1939) available at the same price. ●

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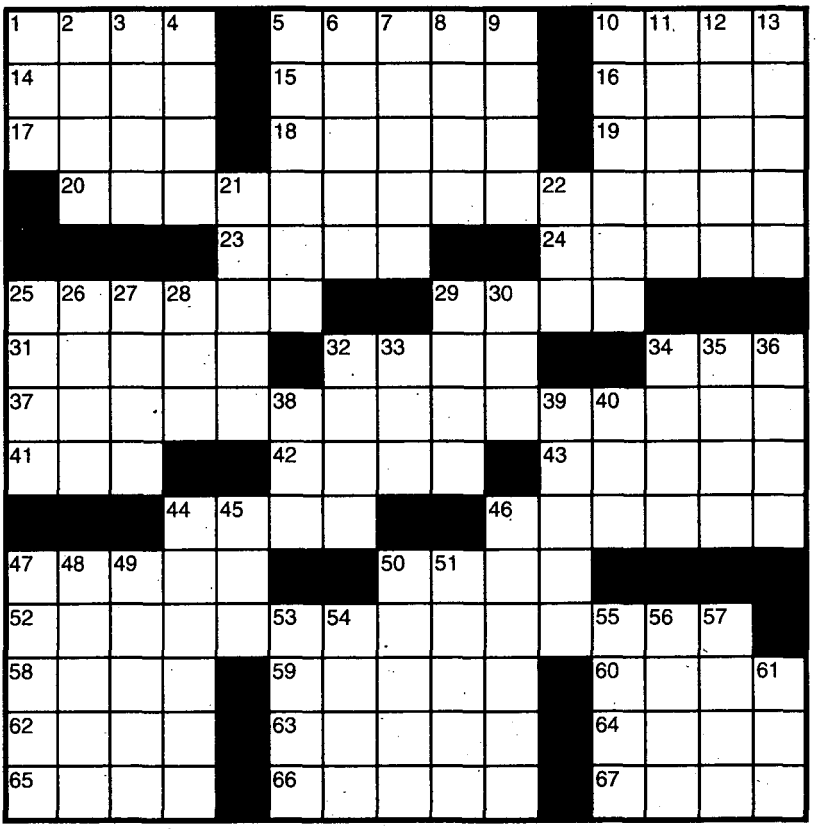
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Les Femmes Cherchent

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 122

ACROSS

1. Bookie's concern
5. Capital of the Balearic Islands
10. South African Fox
14. Decree
15. Satellite of Uranus
16. Ring
17. Entr'
18. Defamatory statement
19. Covering for a coffin

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20. Laurie King's California sleuth
23. Russian river
24. Refuges
25. More daring
29. John Dickson ____
31. Follows fire or smoke
32. Tale teller
34. Included NC and SC
37. Cabot Cove sleuth
41. Peer Gynt's mother
42. Take ____ view of
43. Site sometimes for 46 across
44. Part of TLC
46. Games
47. Mites
50. Appointment
52. Garrison Allen's Arizona sleuth
58. Chief Inspector Dalgleish
59. De Brunhoff's little elephant
60. Sioux
62. *She* ____ *Back,* Patricia Wentworth
63. Accustom
64. Ms. Paretsky
65. Beginning of a Cockney toast
66. Heads in Le Havre
67. RBI, e.g.

DOWN

1. *Death* ___ *Gossip,* M.C. Beaton
2. Mr. Francis
3. Facts
4. Editor's word
5. "My Darling Billy," Dr. William _____, notorious 19th c. English poisoner
6. Caucasian, *var.*
7. Seventh sign of the Zodiac
8. Track event
9. "____ want is a place somewhere," *My Fair Lady*
10. Seem
11. Makes fast
12. A room in a maison
13. Peters of Brother Cadfael mysteries
21. Fragrant resin
22. Neither's partner
25. Indian prince
26. Pub offerings
27. *Cold* ____, Linda Barnes
28. Collection agency, abbr.
29. Precedes storm
30. *We* ___ *the World,* Lionel Richie
32. Take on cargo
33. "___ could write the beauty of your eyes," Shakespeare, *Sonnet 17*
34. Star of *Mask*
35. Posted
36. Altars in ancient Roma
38. Reo, e.g.
39. Slender candle
40. ___ Magnon
44. Mme. Maigret's custards
45. Be unwell
46. Looks intently
47. Quickly
48. Fragrant wood
49. What's in _ ____?
50. First appearance
51. On to
53. Final notice
54. Window part
55. One of the McDonalds
56. Coup d'____
57. Ms. Roberts, alias J.D. Robb, who wrote *Holiday in Death*
61. *Dog* ___ *Dog,* Laurien Berenson

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A Dead Language

by Gillian Linscott

It was a morning in early July, the end of the Trinity term of 1869, when they found Linhope dead among the cows and trampled buttercups in Port Meadow. So it must have been two weeks before that, an afternoon in mid June, when the girl came and plumped herself down, with a nervous little catch of breath, on the end of the bench in Parks where I was sitting.

"Sir, do you speak Latin?"

She'd walked past once already, given me a glance, then skimmed on along the gravel path between the flower beds, straw hat pushed back, dark hair curling over her forehead, blue cotton skirt flapping back to give a glimmer of white-stockinged ankle over dusty black boots. She struck me as poised halfway between respectability and the other thing. When she came back and sat down I kept my eyes on my book. I was in my mid twenties then and, though no worse-looking than the average of men, didn't flatter myself that my face or figure would make young women turn in their tracks. Whatever I'd been expecting, it wasn't her question. It came in the accent of the Oxfordshire countryside, from the long meadows by the upper reaches of the Thames, not the city. When I looked up, her dark eyes were on me, her lips apart, as if my answer were important to her. Yet in Oxford a man who knew Latin was hardly an uncommon specimen.

"Yes. That's to say, we can't be sure how Cicero sounded . . ." She waved centuries of debate aside like so many midges.

"Things like yes and no, and happy or not happy."

"You want to learn Latin?"

"Not all of Latin. Just some words."

A former journalist, Gillian Linscott spent several years reporting on Parliament for the BBC. As a fiction writer, however, the Herefordshire author prefers to turn to the politics of an earlier time, choosing a suffragette turned amateur sleuth for the heroine of her novels. In her stories for *EQMM*, she generally reaches even further back, to mid Victorian times. If this new tale whets your appetite, try her new book, *Absent Friends* (St. Martins). ¶

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The idea of setting up a park bench poor school in the classics would be enough to get me laughed out of my college fellowship. Already I was glancing round to make sure that nobody I knew had spotted us. She made a little appealing gesture, her hand almost brushing my lapel. A small hand, white and gloveless.

"Yes and no?"

"For yes, you'd say *certe*. There's no single word for no. You have to negate an action or condition, like *nolo,* I do not want . . ."

I knew, while I was speaking, that the thing was ridiculous, but she was staring at me in a way that made me feel I was giving food to the famishing. She echoed *certe* and *nolo* carefully, like somebody putting straw round ripe apples, storing them away.

"What does *bus* mean?"

It took me a while to work out, from her accent, what she was saying, then I laughed.

"It's not a word in itself. It's the dative or ablative plural noun ending, like *omnibus*. You see, every noun . . ."

I could see from her eyes that I'd lost her, and the absurdity of sitting there in public, teaching Latin to a young woman who didn't even know what an ablative was made me feel hot with embarrassment. Besides, I thought I'd fathomed the mystery. The poor girl must have come into the company of some young devil of an undergraduate who'd been imposing on her simplicity with his rags of learning. Heaven knows what he'd been saying to her. I stood up.

"If you'd allow me to give you some advice, remember that a man may express in a foreign language sentiments which he'd blush to acknowledge in his own."

Then I picked up my book, raised my hat to her, and walked away.

I told nobody about it because there was nobody at college I could tell. Especially not—in what turned out to be the last two weeks of his life—my old tutor and now senior colleague, Linhope. In those days college fellows didn't marry, and Linhope was one of the old heroic breed of scholars who devoted themselves almost monkishly to their work. The field of his labours had been, for as long as anybody could remember, an obscure poem in four books dating from the first century A.D. about the history and care of oxen. If questioned, he'd admit that the work wasn't in the first, or even the second rank of classical poetry. But he'd add, blinking through his glasses, that it was not without interest, not at all. The anonymous poet had used the humble ox as his starting point for a journey through history, mythology, philosophy—for an investigation of the place of man in relation to the gods above and the earth below. And he'd sip his port and repeat, "Certainly not without interest to the general reader." He must have known that when his definitive edition was published it would be read by a dozen of his fellow scholars at most. But it had come to Linhope as his allotted task in life, and to neglect anything

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he could do to make it perfect would be blasphemy against his gods. His heart and sight were weakening, we all knew. Still, we hoped they'd hold out long enough for him to drive his slow oxen to the press at last.

"He so nearly managed it, too," the master said.

We were following Linhope's coffin as the bearers carried it slowly along the churchyard path, a single wreath of laurel leaves and flowers in college colours on top of it. I knew why the master had invited me to walk beside him.

"Of course, he'd have got there terms ago if it hadn't been for The Fragment."

A year or so before, Linhope had come across ten anonymous lines in a previously overlooked manuscript that might, or might not, have been part of the fourth book of his own poem. The style, meter, subject matter all fitted very well. The provenance was by no means out of the question. Should he include it, or shouldn't he? For a few months he settled on putting it in as an appendix. But then, might even an appendix confer on it a too-hasty legitimacy and entrap other scholars? On the other hand, if it were part of the work, to put it in as an appendix might imply . . . Towards the end, men began to avoid him because however a conversation started, it would turn to the same thing.

"A few more weeks work is really all it needs. He left his papers in very good order."

I could see what was coming towards me, as inexorably as Linhope's coffin to its resting place, and tried to stave it off by changing the subject.

"In spite of dying so unexpectedly."

A drawing in of the master's shoulders under his black coat showed I was touching on something the college preferred not to raise.

"His heart was weak, after all."

"But among a herd of cows in Port Meadow, with that great bruise on his forehead?"

"Caused when he fell. Or perhaps one of the animals happened to . . . tread on him."

In summer the grass in Port Meadow is soft as the breasts of swans. And cows, gentle beasts, are careful where they put their tentative split hooves. I didn't say that to the master. I'd already gone further than he liked. Perhaps he had his suspicions that the academic life and I would soon part company.

"But nobody's explained what he was doing in Port Meadow early in the morning. It's a good mile and a half from the college, and he never went further afield than the Bodleian Library."

It had come up at the inquest, which was no more than a formal-

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ity, and been brushed aside by the coroner as an eccentricity of an elderly don.

The master admitted reluctantly, "It's true that Linhope was never an amateur of aimless perambulation." Then, more urgently, as the bearers reached the edge of the grave and the clergyman took up his position, "I'm quite sure that he would have wished you to see his work to the publishers. A matter of tidying up, no more."

Through the rest of July, with the undergraduates down for the long vacation and the quadrangle under his windows so quiet you could hear the creeper growing up the walls, I toiled at Linhope's orderly ramparts of manuscript. By the last day of the month I'd reached the final pile—the business of The Fragment. Even in his indecision Linhope had been tidy. All the notes and correspondence, all the evidence for and against, were dated and in chronological order. With one exception, and that was the page at the top of the pile. It was an extra copy, in Linhope's hand, of the vexatious ten lines. Diagonally across it, still in his own handwriting but larger and more confident than I'd seen it anywhere else, ran one flaring triumphant word—*Certe.* Then, across the space at the top, another quite different fragment of poetry: *horrendaeque procul secreta Sibyllae.*

"What in the world is that doing there?"

Translated: the distant refuge of the terrifying Sibyl. As any schoolboy should know, a quotation from the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid,* in which the hero Aeneas goes to consult the prophetess of Apollo.

"What's that, sir?"

The question came from the college scout, old Danby, quietly going about his business on the other side of the room. He and I had become companionable over the past few weeks, Danby packing up Linhope's personal effects while I worked on the papers.

"Danby, did you think Mr. Linhope was behaving at all oddly towards the end?"

I shouldn't have put that question to a scout about a don. He might have snubbed me, but he paused, duster in hand, and gave a considered answer.

"Well, sir, he had taken to going out more in the last week or two."

"Where?"

"One of the boys thought he'd seen him at the top end of Walton Street, towards the canal."

The top of Walton Street was an area of raw new terraces of houses beside the railway line and canal, inhabited by college servants and the smaller sorts of traders. No colleges, no libraries, no antiquities. No reason for Linhope to be there at all. But not far away, between the west bank of the canal and the river, lay the broad and pleasant pastures of Port Meadow where, equally inexplicably, he'd been found among the cattle.

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That evening after dinner I walked up Walton Street and strolled at random in the network of little roads around Walton Well. Children playing hopscotch on the hard earth outside the houses looked at me curiously for a while, then went on with their games. There was a smell of smoke and warm metal in the air from the railway, but if you stood on the canal bridge you could catch a whiff of meadowsweet. I went on across the bridge to Port Meadow and watched the sun setting on the far side of the river, and the cows moving slowly in the dusk. The next evening I did it again, and the evening after that. I'd no clear idea what I was looking for, any more than I knew what Linhope had been looking for, and yet somehow an uncertainty about my own life had tied itself up with his. My uneasiness hadn't started with the dark-eyed girl on the bench. It had been there before that, but somehow she was part of it.

So that, on the fourth evening, when I saw her, it hardly came as a surprise. I turned a corner into a street of narrow houses and there she was in front of me. Even from the back, I recognised her from the blue skirt, the straw hat, and a kind of swinging way of walking. I found myself walking faster. If I'd caught her up, goodness knows what I'd have said, but I didn't get the chance. At the far end of the street, still too far away for speaking, she turned into a low gateway in a fence of green palings. There was a rosebush bulging over the fence beside the gate and her shoulder brushed it as she went in, whirling white petals over the path. Some were still falling as I went past, but the black-painted front door of the house was firmly shut and curtains drawn over the windows.

I walked back to college with my mind whirling like the rose petals, not knowing whether to be glad or appalled. I'd guessed at an undergraduate. Could it have been my old tutor, wooing the girl in a dead language? Had there been, over the decades, a whole succession of young women from the lower classes with whom he'd wandered secretly on summer evenings, murmuring Horace or even Catullus to pink, uncomprehending ears? But if Danby was right, it was only in the last few weeks of his life that Linhope had taken to wandering. When I thought of that and those ramparts of manuscript, such a wave of anger and sadness, for Linhope and for myself in thirty years' time, came over me that I thought I must put the whole business out of my mind for good. As a distraction, the following evening I accepted a colleague's invitation to a musical soiree in a new house on the Banbury Road, safely on the university side of Walton Street.

"An Egyptian priestess, from the Pyramids."

I was doing my duty as an unattached male, passing round cups of tea after the music. My hostess and her friend were talking to each other in the low tones kept for female affairs, but I caught the Egyptian priestess. I suppose I must have looked questioning, because she included me in the conversation.

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"Are you a sceptic? You look like one. I was entirely sceptical when I first went there, but she told me things she couldn't possibly have known any other way."

I realised, with a sinking heart, that I was in for spiritualism. There was something of an epidemic of it at the time, even among people who should have known better. Obediently I pulled up a chair beside them and settled to my ordained role of sacrificial sceptic. For a while I let it wash over me: spirit guides, automatic writing, a message from a departed cousin about being sorry about what happened at Ramsgate. Then some phrase hit me like a pebble.

". . . an uneducated woman in herself. Touch of Gypsy to look at her. When the spirits speak in foreign languages, she has no idea what . . ."

"Latin?"

Both women stared at me.

"Not when I was there. French. Not very accurate French, as it happened, but if the poor child was burned as a witch when she was only twelve . . ."

"This medium, where does she live?"

They thought, I'm sure, that they'd gained a convert and were almost shocked by my surrender. One of them whispered a name and a street number that meant nothing to me until she added, "Off the top of Walton Street, near the canal."

"Is it a house with a green fence and a white rosebush?"

If I'd made the table levitate they could hardly have looked more startled.

I waited until early the following evening. The rosebush had shed some more petals. The curtains were still drawn, the front door shut. It sounded hollow when I knocked on it, like an empty house. I waited, heart thumping, more than half hoping that nobody would answer. After a long time there were footsteps inside, light but slow, then she was standing there in the half-open doorway, hair down and feet bare under her skirt, a paisley shawl round her upper body. Where the shawl crossed in front, a rim of pink silk chemise showed, none too clean. Her eyes were sleepy and she gave no sign of recognising me from the park bench.

"I'm a friend of Mr. Linhope," I said.

Still no recognition, of me or the name.

"Has he come with you?"

Her voice was sleepy, too, and I guessed she was just out of bed. I think now that she may have been drinking, though it didn't occur to me at the time.

"He can't. He's dead."

She hitched the shawl up wearily, like a navvy settling his belt before work.

"You'd better come in."

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I followed her into the room behind the drawn curtains. In the shadows I could make out a round table with chairs round it. There was a sideboard against the wall with a trumpet and some other oddments on it and in a far corner a cabinet like the booth for a Punch and Judy show, only not so colourful. She sat down at the table.

"Do you want me to look in the crystal ball for your friend? If you want the cabinet or anything else you'll have to come back later."

The room seemed airless. There was a smell of cabbage. All her freshness I remembered from the park was gone. I sat down, two chairs away from her.

"I want to know about what he wanted to know about."

"I can't remember who you mean."

"Bos."

A little intake of breath. The sleep had gone from her eyes. In the shadowy room I could see the whites of them.

"That day in Parks, I thought you were asking about *'bus.'* It was *bos* he said to you, the word for ox. He came here to ask about a poem."

Came like Aeneas to the distant refuge of the terrifying Sibyl. It must have seemed like that to Linhope, so far from his usual haunts and his fastidious habit of mind. And yet, with his time running out, he'd dare even that if there were the remotest chance that his last question might find an answer. The more I thought of it, the more angry I was with the woman sitting there and sweating. I could smell the sweat, sharp and troubling.

"He was trying to ask in Latin." What else, after all, would the spirit of his dead poet speak? "So you had to go out and scavenge enough Latin to con him out of his money. And of course, it turned out to be easier to give him a 'yes' than a 'no.'"

He'd paid dearly, in several ways, for that *Certe* blazoned across the page.

"We didn't con the old man. We don't con anybody. We give them what they want." She was still scared, but angry, too. "That word, that *bos,* the glass spelled it out for him the first time he came here. It didn't mean anything to us, but you could see it did to him. He kept trying to ask things in a foreign language. Jed guessed it was Latin and said he'd better come back and have a private session with the cabinet."

"At which he put a question to your so-called spirits in Latin, and the spirits answered yes."

"He wanted the yes. In all the time we've been doing it, I've never known anybody want a yes like he did. It was burning off him. He wanted it."

She was almost shouting. One of her white hands was up on the table, moving towards mine as if it wanted to close round my wrist.

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One of my hands had got itself on the table too and was moving towards hers. I dragged it away and held it fast between my knees.

"But he wasn't content with his yes, was he? He came back with more questions. Questions you couldn't answer. That's when you killed him, you and your accomplice."

"No, we didn't mean to kill him. He wanted to kill us. Raving. Talking about going to the police, trying to throttle Jed. I wouldn't have thought an old man would be like that."

Not an old man. A Roman hero who'd gone all the way to Apollo's priestess and found her a fraud in a sweat-stained chemise.

"So he was angry and you killed him."

"He had his hands round Jed's throat. He was choking him. So I hit him with the crystal ball to make him let go. Then he just fell down. Any jury would say it was self-defence."

"But you weren't going to risk a jury, were you? Wait till dark and bundle him out to the meadow like a sack of rubbish. Were the cows your idea of a joke?"

"Cows? What about cows?"

I stood up.

"What are you going to do?"

"Find a magistrate. Do you think you can defraud and murder with impunity?"

I have a dim memory that as I opened the door into the passageway, she was asking who impunity was. It is only a dim memory because at that point the entire universe collided with the back of my skull and threw me into darkness so total that I was not aware even of falling.

"By the canal," the master said, twitching his nose against the sickroom scent of beef tea and freesias. "If the children hadn't fallen over you, you'd have been dead of cold by morning."

"Not in summer."

If his cold disapproval could kill, I shouldn't last the afternoon.

"Is your memory returning at all? Have you the slightest idea how you got there?"

"Not the slightest memory."

Which, literally speaking, was true. I supposed that the two of them had carried me there, much as they'd carried Linhope. Consciousness had returned painfully as I was being jolted back down St. Giles late at night, spread along the seat of a cab. The constable who'd picked me up took it for granted that I'd been felled by some pickpocket, and I was too ill to argue. But weakness had given me back the clarity of mind that anger had taken away. I knew now that there was a choice to make. If I told my story, the girl and her Jed might or might not hang. But my old tutor would hang higher, an object of derision for generations to come, the fine scholar who at the very end had blemished thirty years of work by his dealings with a

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shop-soiled sibyl. In any case, was it likely that the two of them would wait to be arrested? By the time I was conscious, they'd have been far away. The two of them would come, as the poet said, to little good, but to Oxford and their friends no more.

"I wonder what you were doing in that part of town in the first place."

The master thought it reflected badly on the college. In the next few days I'd tell him that I'd decided to give up my fellowship. A scholar's life wasn't for me. Linhope, at the end of his life, had taught me that last valuable lesson. Though I didn't answer, he lingered.

"Linhope's manuscript—we've packed it up for the printer, all except The Fragment. Tell me, have you been able to come to any conclusions. Do we include it, yes or no?"

I thought of the girl's face in the shadowy room, her voice: "I've never known anybody want a yes like he did."

"Yes," I said.

Unacademic. Unprincipled. Unjustifiable. And yet the fact remains that a year later, when Linhope's work was published and my decision past recalling, a professor at a German university found another manuscript that proved beyond doubt that The Fragment really did belong with the oxen poem. And if that was a gift from Apollo that I didn't deserve, Linhope certainly did. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

O	D	D	S	■	P	A	L	M	A	■	A	S	S	E
F	I	A	T	■	A	R	I	E	L	■	P	E	A	L
A	C	T	E	■	L	I	B	E	L	■	P	A	L	L
■	K	A	T	E	M	A	R	T	I	N	E	L	L	I
■	■	■	■	L	E	N	A	■	■	O	A	S	E	S
R	A	C	I	E	R	■	■	C	A	R	R	■	■	■
A	L	A	R	M	■	L	I	A	R	■	■	C	S	A
J	E	S	S	I	C	A	F	L	E	T	C	H	E	R
A	S	E	■	■	A	D	I	M	■	A	R	E	N	A
■	■	■	C	A	R	E	■	■	S	P	O	R	T	S
A	C	A	R	I	■	■	D	A	T	E	■	■	■	■
P	E	N	E	L	O	P	E	W	A	R	R	E	N	■
A	D	A	M	■	B	A	B	A	R	■	O	T	O	E
C	A	M	E	■	I	N	U	R	E	■	S	A	R	A
E	R	E	S	■	T	E	T	E	S	■	S	T	A	T

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A Monologue for Mystery Lovers

by Peter Lovesey

This little old lady is in the pub and her voice is extra loud.
After a few of the local brew she is playing to the crowd.
Her speech is slurred and her cheeks are pink and her eyes are shining bright
As she explains to a bunch of the lads what brought her here this night.
"Fill 'em up," she says to the landlord Les. "The drinks are all on me.
Sixty years ago in this very bar I met my destiny.
He was tall and dark and handsome, too—as handsome as handsome goes,
With piercing eyes and a cultured voice and a very distinguished nose.
And above all that a deerstalker hat perched atop his six-foot frame.
I'm not going to spoil my story, but you'll probably guess his name.
Truth to tell I was under his spell before the night began.
Oh, his silver hair was beyond compare—I adore an older man.
Now I need to make clear to all of you here that I was just nineteen
And my rosebud face had won first place in the Tatler magazine.
But I acted coy with the average boy, keeping a low profile.
In the pub I'd sit at the back and knit, and hardly ever smile.
As I recall, I was knitting a shawl in a pretty pink three-ply
Upon the night the distracting sight of this stranger caught my eye.
Without dropping a stitch I made my pitch to this dream with the gorgeous nose.
Men are easy to pull with a ball of wool, as every woman knows.
With a nonchalant toss I bowled it across to where my hero stood.
A line so true that it found his shoe like the nudge of a bowler's wood.
There was deathly quiet inside the bar when he eyed this ball of pink.
Nothing was said. He just turned his head and requested another drink.
But a man called Bruce said, 'Can you deduce the source of this woolly sphere?'
There were laughs all round, an ugly sound made more ugly by the beer.
It chilled my skin and I wished I'd been outside the bar-room door.
The wool, you see, was linked to me, by a thread across the floor.
Then my heart-throb spoke, a brilliant stroke, or where is genius from?
He said, 'I deduce, if my thoughts are of use, that this ball is an anarchist bomb.'
The laughter died and they rushed outside—oh, you should have seen them flee.

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Scared out of their shoes they quit their booze, all except him and me.
After quite some while he gave me a smile that flashed like a carving knife.
Prompting me to say in my modest way, 'Sir, I lead a sheltered life.'
He replied, 'My dear. That's abundantly clear to a man of my profession.
The clothes, the hair, the tonic you drink, the mild-as-milk expression.
Your name is Jane, you're a first-class brain, and as pure as the driven snow.
I can also see you're attracted to me, and that's very good to know.
Don't ask how I tell, it bores me to hell to answer this type of question.
But now we're alone, the birds having flown, may I make a bold suggestion?
Next time you feel like an intimate meal why not travel to London town?
Baker Street for high tea, 221B, is an offer one shouldn't turn down.'
Reaching up to a shelf, he then helped himself to a very fine champagne.
Without more talk he popped the cork and it flew like an aeroplane.
Now the lads out back heard the cork go crack and knew where it was from.
A controlled detonation was their explanation: we had dealt with the anarchist bomb.
Feeling rather more bold, they came in from the cold to find the pub forsaken.
Not wanting trouble, we had left on the double, with only the bubbly taken."

The place is hushed. We all feel crushed, not knowing if it's ended,
This gripping tale from the lady frail: it seems to be suspended.
Then she smiles, the old dear, and asks for a beer, and we offer a glass of champagne,
If she will reveal: did she go for that meal, high tea in his rooms with her swain?
She says, "What's one glass to a lady of class? It's a magnum or nothing for me."
So we have a whip-round, and forty pound, for a magnum of Mumm '83.
She sinks one or two of this premier cru, then gives a peculiar smile.
"Yes, I went for the tea at 221B, and the visit was very worthwhile.
For apart from the food, which was frightfully good, what followed was out of this world:
The violin strain, the shot of cocaine, the pipe smoke that twisted and curled.
I have to confess that my memory is less than exact as to what happened then.
But I wish to point out in case there is doubt that I had little

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knowledge of men.
You have to believe I was rather naive; I didn't quite understand,
When a question was posed by my glamorous host: had I heard of his Speckled Band?

I thought, Janey, my dear, you must get out of here, if you value your reputation.
But he said with a smile, 'It's a case in my file, a famous investigation.
In you I detect a fine intellect that could be as sharp as my own.
I tell you in truth, you will make a good sleuth, if I teach you the things I have known.'
Well he told me the history of many a mystery including his Speckled Band,
The Lion's Mane, and the Second Stain, and the thumb from the engineer's hand.
The Five Orange Pips came hot from his lips along with his Sign of Four.
Crime after crime, I lost count of time, and still he detained me with more.
When a pause came at last I was really aghast, for midnight was just coming round.
I cried out, 'I must go!' But he said, 'No, no, no. There's the tale of the gigantic hound.'
Now who would pass up the Baskerville pup from the lips of the Baker Street master?
My option was plain: I had to remain, just hoping he'd go a bit faster.
It was dark and profound, his account of the hound, with effects he had not used before.
I was really afraid when he actually bayed, just like that thing on the moor.
I said, 'Please would you stop. This is over the top. It's making me queasy with fright.'
So he kissed me instead and took me to bed—and the dog didn't bark in the night.
You may think I was lax to run off the tracks, staying late in 221B.
Yet I claim in defense that in more than one sense that night was the making of me.
For sixty years later I'm an investigator unashamedly shedding a tear
Recalling the night that Miss Marple was launched—on the start of my brilliant career."

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CLOTHES MAKE THE MAN

by G.M. Ford

The prosecutor looked like Hoss Cartwright.

"Mr. Waterman," he continued, "in your capacity as a licensed private investigator, did you have occasion to be employed by anyone present in this courtroom today?"

"Yes, I did."

The Assistant D.A.'s name was Paul Stillman. Before this morning, I'd never heard of him. For the past ten days, the papers had been quoting reliable sources, all of whom whispered that Mel Turpin, the D.A. himself, was going to step in and personally take the reins. On the surface, it seemed to make sense. After all, what could be better? A State Supreme Court Justice on trial for murder. Not only that, but the case was a slam dunk. Mas photo ops. It was money.

Mel Turpin knew better, and so did I. It didn't matter that the case against the judge was a grounder. What mattered were the pictures. And the pictures were going to get real ugly. The evening news anchors were going to put on their Mr. Serious faces and warn their viewers about the graphic nature of the photographs they were about to see and suggest that children and the faint of heart might want to leave the room.

What politicians like Turpin and my old man understood was that the average citizen had a short and very selective memory. Two weeks after the trial was over, all the voting public would remember were the pictures they'd seen on the tube. Exactly who had done what to whom and why would get downright fuzzy for most of them. Mel Turpin was smart enough to make damn sure that his cherubic countenance wasn't one of those ill-recalled images. That's precisely what assistant D.A.'s like Stillman were for. Photo Fodder.

G. M. Ford's fiction debut, in 1995, with the novel *Who in Hell is Wanda Fuca?* (Walker), brought a flood of favorable criticism—*The Washington Post* calling his central character, Leo Waterman, "the most likable private eye to make the scene since John D. MacDonald's Travis McGee." Mr. Ford lives in Seattle, the setting for his novels. This new story belongs to the Waterman series: Readers who like it won't want to miss his new novel, *Last Ditch* (Avon).

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"Could you please point out that person," Stillman said.

The defense attorney jumped to his feet. "Your Honor . . ." he said in a world-weary voice, ". . . the defense is prepared to stipulate that the defendant . . ."

Dan Hennessey was the best legal help money could buy. On those few occasions when I'd seen him in action, he was all controlled confidence and meticulous motions. He always seemed to have a little something extra in his sock that the opposition wasn't expecting. It wasn't surprising. He had the best staff money could buy. The way I heard it, even a junior partnership in Hennessey, Howell, and Kidd was worth a cool million a year. If you were ambitious enough and good enough, clerking for Dan Hennessey was the next logical step after *Stanford Law Review*. I'd never seen him desperate before.

"Excuse me . . . Excuse me, Your Honor," Stillman interrupted. "Once again, Your Honor, if Mr. Hennessey doesn't mind, I'd like to try my own case here."

Judge Bobbie Downs had a reputation for quick and dirty jurisprudence and for making a fair number of procedural mistakes. I figured Hennessey had danced in his office when he heard she'd been assigned. That was before the defendant decided to lend a hand on his own case. Downs waved the gavel at the defense table, indicating that Hennessey should slide his charcoal gray Armani back into his seat and then turned to me.

"Mr. Waterman."

I pointed at Judge Douglas R. Brennan, seated next to Hennessey at the defense table. "He's right there next to defense counsel." I said.

Stillman spoke directly to the judge. "Your honor, please let the record show that Mr. Waterman identified the defendant, Douglas R. Brennan."

"So noted," she said.

Brennan sat there like a bird of prey, his fierce eyes hooded, looking downward toward his piously folded fingers, allowing the mane of white hair and square chin to command the room on their own. I felt like Adam in that painting from the Sistine Chapel. Except, in this picture, God wasn't pointing back my way.

"And what was it that Mr. Brennan wanted you to do?"

Hennessey started to rise, but Judge Downs waved him back down.

"He wanted me to find his housekeeper. A woman named Felicia Mendoza."

"Did he tell you why he wanted Ms. Mendoza found?"

"He said she'd stolen a number of things from his house. Jewelry. Mementos. Things with sentimental value, was how he put it."

"And did Judge Brennan give you any indication as to why he wished to employ a private detective in this matter, rather than, say . . . taking the more traditional path of simply calling the police?"

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"Your Honor, Mr. Stillman is leading the witness," Hennessey complained. "If he wants to . . ."

All it got him was a frown and another gavel wave.

"He said he didn't want to make a big deal of it. He said the stuff wasn't of great monetary value and he didn't want to make trouble for the woman. He said she didn't speak much English and he didn't want to scare her. The Judge said he thought he could convince her to return his belongings, so he just wanted me to find her for him."

"And did you do so?"

"I found her," I said.

Hennessey was on his feet again. "May we approach the bench, Your Honor." You had to admire a guy who thought of himself as plural.

She waved him forward. Stillman followed along. They formed a tight muttering knot around the judge. My name and the word prejudicial were being bandied about. Damn right I was prejudicial. Prejudicial as hell.

I found her sleeping on the floor in a Catholic women's shelter down in Tacoma. They didn't want to let me in, but since I'd tracked her that far and had made it plain that I wasn't going away, they figured they didn't have much to lose by letting us chat. Two very large women stood by her side and glared at me while we talked. She was maybe five foot two, with a big pair of liquid brown eyes taking up most of her round face. Her English was just fine, which was more than could be said about the rest of her. The entire right side of her face was blistered and the color of an eggplant. The insides of both her arms were pitted with burn marks, old and new, and from what she showed me of her shoulders and the backs of her legs, it was obvious that she'd been systematically beaten for years. Seems the judge, while on a judicial junket to Central America about six years ago had more or less bought her from a Guatemalan orphanage. Four hundred bucks and the promise of American citizenship. She was twelve at the time. Being twelve and not speaking a word of English, she had to watch a lot of daytime television before she picked up enough of the language to become absolutely certain that the judge's little sexual idiosyncrasies were neither a standard part of the American courting ritual nor a painful prerequisite to U.S. citizenship. She'd run away for the first time three weeks ago. The judge had tracked her down at the bus station and used a steam iron on the side of her face. She'd hired an attorney. Said she learned about lawyers watching *Another World.*

I gave her my card and the hundred and seventy bucks I had in my pocket. I spent the thirty minute drive back to Seattle analyzing my options and trying to keep my lunch down. In retrospect, I did a hell of a lot better job with the lunch than I did with the options.

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Stillman went on. "So then, Mr. Waterman . . ." he gazed back over his shoulder at the defense table, ". . . before we were interrupted, you indicated that you were successful in your search for Miss Mendoza, is that correct?"

"Yes," I said.

"In what condition did you find Miss Mendoza?"

I told him. Hennessey objected three times during my recitation: Once to complain that my entire conversation with Felicia Mendoza was hearsay, once to decry my lack of medical credentials, and a third time to object to the jury being allowed to see the post mortem photos of Felicia Mendoza's horribly crosshatched back, buttocks, and upper thighs. He went 0 for three. Trolling for grounds for appeal, I figured. Make the judge rule on as many matters as possible. Hope she'll screw up something important. When your client, two weeks before he goes on trial for murder, gets caught trying to off one of the key prosecution witnesses, you are then forced to cast upon the waters the very straws at which you may later be forced to grasp.

"What did you do next, Mr. Waterman?"

I slid the check, facedown, across the table.

"I'm returning your retainer and your entire advance for expenses," I said. "Twenty-four hundred dollars."

The judge pulled the crisp white napkin from his lap and dabbed at the corners of his mouth. He looked down at the check as if I'd pushed a turd over next to his elbow.

"It can't be *that* hard to find one little wetback," he said.

If he'd said something else, I most likely would have let it go. I'd have said something noncommittal, made my excuses, and gotten up the road. Yeah, sure. And if Mama Cass had shared that ham sandwich with Karen Carpenter, they'd both be alive today.

I leaned over the table, putting my face close to his.

"Maybe it escaped your notice, Judge, but slavery, sexual and otherwise, went out of fashion quite a while back."

He never batted an eye.

"Oh dear," he teased. "Moral indignation? How quaint."

I held his gaze. "Listen to me, Judge. I've never rolled over on a client in my life. I've gone to jail for refusing to divulge." I held up a finger. "But, you know, in your case, just this once, I might be willing to make an exception. The only reason I'm not going to the authorities is because Miss Mendoza is going to do it for me."

"I *am* the authorities."

I stood up and pitched my napkin into my plate.

"God help us all, then."

"Your father would be most disappointed in you," he said.

"I don't think so."

He used his napkin to polish the rim of his water glass.

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"And to think. I came to you because . . ."

I cut him off. "You came to me because you thought you could trade on your relationship with my old man. That's why you came to me. That and because you couldn't take a chance on a big agency. They'd drop a dime on you in a New York minute. You figured you'd find somebody who needed the money."

"Exactly," he said. "And that is precisely why no set of spurious allegations from an illiterate and I might add "illegal" alien and a low-rent private dick can possibly cause me even the slightest bit of concern."

My fist itched to wipe the smug look off his face.

"You know, Judge," I said instead, "my old man was a great believer in the notion that timing was everything. And, you know what? I think your timing on this thing is lousy. As a matter of fact, I don't think it could be worse if you tried. Domestic violence is the crime of the month. Right now a guy will do more time for belting his old lady than he would for holding up a Circle K. You read the papers. You know what I'm talking about. Presidential advisors. City Councilmen. Actors. Athletes. You want to screw up your life forever, you just kick in your ex's front door." I shook my head. "We're awash in post-O.J. rage here, Judge." I gave him my best smile. "Hold onto your shorts, Your Honor, because unless I'm mistaken, the illiterate and I might add "illegal" Miss Mendoza is about to rock your little world." He didn't exactly faint, but the shit-eating smirk was long gone. If he said anything to my back, I didn't hear it.

"And during this meeting with Mr. Brennan, am I to understand that you did *not* divulge Miss Mendoza's whereabouts."

"No, I didn't."

"And why was that? Hadn't the judge retained you to provide him with that very piece of information?"

"The judge didn't need a private detective," I said. "He needed a pimp."

"Your Honor," Hennessey bellowed. Even while springing to his feet in protest, he still managed to button the single button on his suit coat. Muscle memory, I figured.

Hennessey ranted; Stillman did his best to appear appalled; Judge Downs had my answer stricken from the record and gave me the gavel shaking of a lifetime. As for me . . . I tried to look chastened.

Nine days after I gave the judge his money back, seven-thirty on a Saturday morning, I groped for the ringing phone, knocking it over onto the floor where it ricocheted off the oak planks and disappeared under the bed. I had to find the cord and drag the whole thing up over the covers like a stubborn puppy. I heard a dial tone, but the darn thing was still ringing. Rebecca elbowed me hard in the other ear.

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"It's the doorbell," she moaned.

Even in my dream state, there was no doubt about what I was looking at through the crack in the door. Two cops. Detectives. Not local. Detective Gregory Balderama and Detective Sergeant Vince Wales. Tacoma PD. Balderama was younger. Under forty, with a thick head of carefully coiffed black hair. He stood on the porch, shifting his weight from foot to foot. Wales was old school. Rumpled. Fifty or so. No more than five years from a pension, his face a stew of disinterest and cynicism. Once we agreed on who we all were, he thrust a photograph under my nose.

"You know this person, Waterman?"

It was a woman. Maybe forty years old with a thick neck and dirty blond hair. A head shot. In this case, a shot of a head that had been shot in the head. Twice. Once just under the right eye and once, it looked like, in the right ear. A symmetrical pool of dark liquid fanned out around her wide face like a pagan headdress.

"I don't think so," I said.

Balderama stepped forward with another picture.

"What about this one?"

It looked to be a hundred pounds of raw beef liver in a blue print dress. I pushed his arm away and turned my head.

"Jesus Christ," I complained. "What the hell was that?"

"Whatever it was, was carrying your business card," he said. He pulled a plastic bag from his coat pocket. Sure enough, one of my cards rested on the bottom of the bag.

I pointed at the photo. "Lemme see that," I said.

I held it by the edges, as if something might get on my hands. It was hard to tell that it had ever been human. The skull had been pounded flat. The arms were splayed at impossible angles and the shinbone on the left leg was visible in two places.

"Jesus Christ," I said again.

Sergeant Wales filled me in. The deceased were found in the basement of an abandoned building in downtown Tacoma. The first woman had been shot three times. Two in the head. One in the upper right chest. The second woman had been beaten to death. The M.E. thought baseball bats. From the imbedded fragments taken from the body, at least two separate bats. One steel, one aluminum. M.E. said even her toes had been pulverized.

"No ID on either of them?"

"Just your card, Waterman."

I shrugged. "Wish I could help."

Balderama took over. "The medical examiner says she was Hispanic. Probably South American. Somewhere between eighteen and twenty-five. A hundred ten pounds. No vaccination marks. Maybe an illegal alien . . ." He stopped when the photograph slipped from my hand and floated to the ground.

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"Come in," I said, when I could speak again. "Give me a few minutes to get dressed."

An hour later, Rebecca came padding through the living room in her bare feet, following the smell of coffee back toward the kitchen. As Wales and Balderama stood and mumbled introductions, Rebecca picked the pictures up from the coffee table. Wales tried to stop her, but it was too late.

"Small caliber. Probably a twenty-two," she said. "The ear wound was point blank. Classic wise-guy pattern."

She winced slightly at the second photo. "Cripes," she said. "Somebody used her for a piñata, or what?"

Her exit left the cops open-mouthed. I gave 'em a break.

"She's a pathologist for the county M.E.," I said

When they could breathe again, we got back to work.

From what Wales and Balderama told me later, they went from my house right to the shelter in Tacoma. The other woman's name was Jill Clark. She was a volunteer. A couple of days later, when the Seattle *Times* ran a different picture of her, I realized that she was one of the women who'd been in the room while I interviewed Felicia Mendoza.

The two women had gone to a movie together. The seven o'clock showing of *My Best Friend's Wedding* at the Uptown Cinema. A sixteen-year-old usher named Shantiqua Harris remembered seeing the women leave together at the end of the show. Shantiqua had noticed how protective Jill Clark seemed to be of the smaller woman and had wondered if they were lesbians. That was the last time either woman was seen alive. Two kids looking for a lost kitty found the bodies.

Wales and Balderama interviewed the rest of the shelter staff and the doctor who had examined her. They interviewed both Felicia Mendoza's priest and her attorney. Then they consulted their direct superior, took three deep breaths, said three Hail Marys, and requested a murder-one warrant for Washington State Supreme Court Justice Douglas R. Brennan.

Local legal wisdom made the case against the judge to be pretty much a dead heat. A mountain of circumstantial evidence and hearsay, all pointing at His Honor, but nothing to connect the judge directly to the murders. When the judge hired Dan Hennessey, most legal pundits figured he had a fifty-fifty chance of walking. Apparently, however, the judge wasn't convinced.

Stillman finished up for me. "And, after telling the police your story, the rest, as they say, was history. Is that correct, Mr. Waterman?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Until . . ."

"Until what, Mr. Waterman?"

"Until about six weeks ago, when one of my . . ." I groped for a

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word ". . . contacts told me that somebody had a contract out on my life."

"And you believed this person?"

"Absolutely."

Frankie Ortiz sitting at my backyard patio table drinking iced cappuccino with Rebecca was about the equivalent of Charlie Manson having tea in the Rose Garden with Hillary Clinton. Frankie was a little guy. No more than five six or so. I'd always thought he looked like the old-time band leader Cab Calloway. Thick, processed hair combed straight back. A bold wide mouth accented by a pencil-thin moustache which clung precisely to the outline of his prominent upper lip. He had a penchant for light-colored suits and two-tone shoes. Frankie worked for Tim Flood.

Tim Flood and my father had started out together working for Dave Beck and the Teamsters. At the time, their official title had been "labor organizers." Revisionist history now labeled them as thugs, but neither of them minded. My father had parlayed his local notoriety into eleven terms on the Seattle City Council. He'd run for mayor four times, suffering a narrow defeat on each occasion. Tim had gone on to become Seattle's homegrown version of organized crime. Tim Flood had his fingers in every pie. My old man had his relatives in every city and county department. The way I figured it, six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Rebecca was beaming. "Oh, Leo . . . Mr. Ortiz tells the most outrageous stories," she said. "I can't believe it."

"I'll bet," I said.

I figured Frankie was probably skipping the one about how he'd shot Sal Abbruzio in the spine for skimming the numbers take. And you sure wouldn't want to tell the one about cutting off Nicky Knight's fingers in the back booth at Vito's. Especially not the part about Big Hazel freshening their drinks between fingers. Not before dark anyway.

"Frankie," I said, and offered my hand. He took it.

I dragged a chair over next to Rebecca and put a hand on her knee. She crossed her legs and gave my hand a pat.

Frankie took a sip of his cappuccino. "You know, the kid's gonna graduate this June," he said. "June eighth."

The kid was Tim's granddaughter, Caroline Nobel. A few years back, I'd gotten her out of a nasty situation involving some dangerous tree huggers who thought they could save the planet by blowing things up.

"Gonna be a schoolteacher," he said.

"Great."

"I think it's what's keepin' the old man alive. He ain't been outta the house in years, but he says we're goin' to the ceremony. His doctors are shittin' bricks. Say it'll kill him."

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"How is the old man? He still lucid?"

Frankie smiled. "Depends on who he's talkin to. Caroline comes around, they have a hell of a time, laughin' and carrryin' on. His doctors try to talk to him, all of a sudden he thinks he's friggin' Cleopatra."

Another minute of mindless small talk and Rebecca finally picked up the vibe. Frankie was old school. Nothing personal, but Frankie Ortiz didn't do business in front of women. She shot me a pitying look and got to her feet. "If you gentlemen will excuse me, I best go inside before I get the vapors."

Frankie rose and shook her hand in thanks. He stayed on his feet until she closed the French doors behind her and then sat back down.

"Nice girl, Leo. You're a lucky guy."

"Thanks, Frankie. You just stop by to shoot the breeze, or did you have something a little more substantial you wanted to discuss?"

I think he was surprised at how polite I was. Usually he likes to dance around a bit, but today he got right to it.

"Got a call from a guy we know in Vegas," he said. "A *macher.*" He said it right, with the back of the throat noise. "You know what a *macher* is?"

A *macher* was a maker. A big shot. A guy who could make things happen. I knew the breed well. My old man had been a *macher.*

"Yeah, I know what it means," I said.

"So the guy says to me, he says, 'Hey Frankie, didn't you tell me about some private dickhead guy name Waterson or some such shit who helped you and Tim out that one time wid the kid?'"

Frankie looked up at me to see if I was paying attention. I was.

"So I says to him, yeah, that's right, why? And he says, there's a couple of urban cowboys, been losing big lately out at the south end of the strip, tellin' the girls the dough they're pissin' away is no problem cause there's more where that came from. Say they're headed up north to pop a Seattle private dick named Waterville or something. My friend says he thought maybe we'd like to know. From what he hears, these bozos been tellin' the honeys that they crewed for this same party a while back. He asks me if we know anything about what's goin' on." Frankie made a face. ". . . and I ask him, hey . . . what the hell are you callin' us for? The friggin' newspaper knows more about the shit goin' on around here these days than Tim and I do; we're strictly legit. Only staff Tim's got anymore are the nurses in charge of wiping his wrinkled ass, for Christ sake. We're not exactly still in business, if you know what I'm talkin' about." He sounded almost wistful.

"You trust this Vegas guy?" I asked.

He tilted his head and pursed his lips. "I don't trust anybody, Leo," he said. "But I was you, I'd watch my ass."

❖ ❖ ❖

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"And that, of course, explains why you were wearing a bulletproof vest," Stillman prodded. It was a smart move. Most citizens don't jog in a Kevlar vest or carry a nine-millimeter automatic, with two extra clips taped to their chests. Tends to chafe. Stillman knew he could count on the defense to bring it up, so he did it himself. Hennessey would sure as hell try to show that my state of paranoia was somehow responsible for the gunplay rather than the two professional shooters the judge had hired to put me out of my misery.

About two minutes after Frankie said his goodbyes, I'd called the cops. Balderama and Wales had sympathized and offered twenty-four-hour police protection, but I knew what that meant. Two weeks down the road, they'd need the manpower for something else, offer us the services of a retired school crossing guard, and we'd be right back where we started. Rebecca and I talked it over and decided that we weren't going to let anybody bring our lives to a grinding halt. The way we figured it, if we stopped our lives, the judge won. The way I figured it, if I let scumbags like the judge run me around, I might as well find a new line of work. Like selling Amway maybe.

I settled for the loan of a Kevlar vest and took what I considered to be prudent steps to protect us. We had a first-class alarm system installed in the house. Rebecca and I now locked our cars in the garage every night, instead of leaving them strewn about the driveway. She was carpooling to work with Judy Benet. I made it a point to meet new clients in busy public places in broad daylight. We consoled ourselves by telling each other that these precautions were appropriate for the late nineties and what's more, long overdue. Neither of us believed it for a minute, but for some reason, neither of us was willing to abandon the illusion, either. Go figure.

While I normally only carried a weapon when it seemed likely I might need one, these days I didn't go to the john without considering the question of how many rounds I was carrying. The judge's trial began in a couple of weeks. I figured that once I testified the threat was over. At least, I hoped so. Despite our best efforts, the strain was wearing us down. Without consciously willing it so, lately, more often than not, we found ourselves staying at home, watching the boob tube in darkened rooms. I spent the nights lying awake listening to Rebecca toss and turn and trying to remember what programs we'd watched.

My sleep patterns had been a mess ever since Frankie's little visit. I'd taken to dawn runs around Green Lake as a way to work off some of the stress. I hated running, but, what the hell. I was up.

It's a little under three miles around the lake. When I was a kid, I'd run around and around until I lost interest. Back then, it was more of a swamp than a lake. These days, they pump it full of reservoir water to keep it pretty, and if I manage to jog around it once

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without pulling a muscle or projectile vomiting it makes my whole day.

I always start and end at the south end of the lake by the Mussert Shell House. It's a dark little glen with an attached parking lot and the only part of the lake that doesn't front a city street. I figured if I started and ended there, I could make all the noise I wanted and not bother anybody. After all, wouldn't want the sound of my puking and wheezing to keep anybody up. It never occurred to me that it was also an excellent choice for a kill zone.

I was walking in circles out at the end of a twenty-foot floating dock that juts out into the lake, trying to catch my breath and spitting into the water, when he walked by on the path, giving me a curt nod of the head before disappearing behind the Shell House.

If clothes do indeed make the man, this guy's outfit made him the poster boy for polyester. He should have gone shopping at Eddie Bauer first. Or maybe REI. Gotten himself a nice earth-tone Gortex shell, some chinos, a pair of waterproof wafflestompers, and a Free Tibet button. If he'd blended in better, he and his partner would have ended up back in Vegas with the hookers, and I, in all probability, would have ended up dead. As it was, he stuck out like a barnacle in a Béarnaise sauce.

About forty years old and twenty pounds overweight, he'd greased his hair into an old-fashioned pompadour with a sharp part on my side. Bob's Big Boy. Not only was he wearing the last leisure suit in America, but he was also carrying a four-foot floral arrangement wrapped in newspaper. Flowers for his girlfriend. Long-stemmed. Real long. At five-fifteen on a Tuesday morning. Yeah, sure. Every hair on my body suddenly stood on end.

The fact that they were here at this time of the morning meant they'd been casing me for a couple of days and knew my habits. The fact that I hadn't spotted them told me I was getting old and sloppy.

I reached behind me and tried to bring the automatic out from under the back of the vest, but I was sweaty and everything was stuck to me. Before I got my hand to the gun, he came roaring back around the corner of the building, sprinting down the asphalt ramp toward the landward end of the dock spewing flowers in his wake. A pair of blue steel nostrils the size of my fists now protruded from the front of the flapping newspaper. He was no more than twenty-five feet from me when he let fly with the sawed-off shotgun, emptying both barrels. Double-aught buck shells contain what amounts to four thirty-two caliber projectiles, coming at something like a thousand miles an hour. Three of them hit me directly in the Kevlar vest. The fourth, although I didn't know it until later, entered the soft flesh of my left arm just above the elbow. At the time, I was too busy to notice. The last image I had was of him, still in full stride, cracking the gun and reaching into his pocket for more shells.

The impact blew me completely off the end of the dock, sending me

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down into the dark water, where my primal urge to breach and breathe was instantly overcome by the certainty that if I so much as poked my head above the surface, he'd blow it clean off.

I groped around in front of me in the murky water and found one of the concrete-filled drums that had been sunk in the lake to hold the dock in place. The ribbed metal was cold and slick with algae. I wrapped both arms around the barrel and pulled myself to the bottom of the lake. The water was about six feet deep and teeth-chattering cold. I'd been out of breath from running, and whatever air I had in my lungs had been driven out by the impact of the slugs. I'd only been down about ten seconds, but, shotgun or no shotgun, I had to breathe.

With the last of my strength, I pulled myself past the submerged barrel, pushed hard off its surface with my feet, and came up under the dock. I held my nose and mouth with my hand, forcing myself not to sputter or gasp. I eased my lungs full and looked up. Through the cracks between the boards, I could see the outline of his feet silhouetted against the gray morning sky. He had no reason to be careful; he'd seen the slugs hit me full in the chest. He was standing out at the end of the dock, waiting for me to float up so he could pump another load into me.

As I moved his way, I pulled the nine-millimeter from the small of my back and thumbed off the safety. I moved slowly, walking on the bottom, making sure I didn't create ripples. I got right between his feet, put the muzzle of the gun tight against the treated boards, checked the angle to make sure it was perpendicular, and pulled the trigger three times. He hit the deck like he'd been dropped out of a helicopter.

I swallowed some more air, dipped my head under the water, and pulled myself out from under the dock. He lay with his face no more than a foot from mine, rocking in agony and moaning, his eyes screwed shut, both hands clutching his groin. I was so close that when I shot him in the forehead, I saw hair fly from the back of his head.

I didn't have time to dwell on it. The sound of squealing tires jerked my head toward the parking lot. His partner had probably been watching my car, just in case I changed my morning routine. The sound of two weapons had brought him running.

I heard him shout, "Lamar, you okay?" He waited a minute and then tried again, "Lamar, come on, answer me, boy."

I stood shivering in the chin-deep water, using the now-departed Lamar as a shield. The partner poked his head around the corner of the building and then quickly pulled it back. He was blond and younger.

"Lamar, can you hear me?" he shouted.

I reached under the front of the vest and tore off one of the extra clips that I'd taped to my chest. I put it on the dock next to Lamar's

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nose. A small stream of blood rolled down the side of the dock and into the water beside me. In the distance, a siren was winding our way. Somebody had called the cops. I mouthed a silent prayer.

I'll give the kid credit for loyalty or maybe some sort of over-developed sense of male bonding. Even with an approaching siren whooping in his ears, he wasn't about to leave his buddy. He came out from the building in a combat stance. Moving quickly, waving a square black Uzi from side to side, spinning as he searched for a target.

He spotted the body. "Oh, shit, Lamar," he cried.

He never saw me. When he looked to the right, I bobbed up out of the water, steadied both hands on the edge of the dock, and shot him in the chest. He staggered backward and then sat down on the pavement with his legs spread out before him like a child at play. The Uzi slipped from his fingers, ratcheting off several rounds as it hit the pavement and then, suddenly, everything went quiet. I was still standing in the water, shaking uncontrollably, when the cops arrived and pried the automatic from my stiff fingers.

Stillman again spoke directly to Judge Downs.

"Your Honor, please let the record show that Mr. Waterman's assailants have since been positively identified as Lamar B. Highsmith of Winnemuka, Nevada and Johnny Dale Smits, Jr., of Haden Lake, Idaho. Mr. Highsmith was pronounced dead at the scene, the victim of multiple gunshot wounds. Mr. Smits will be appearing as a witness for the prosecution later in these proceedings."

"So noted," she said.

They said I missed his heart by an inch, but if I were to judge, I'd say I must have nicked it. Faced with the death penalty for aggravated murder, Smits rolled over like a trained seal. Once he started talking, they couldn't shut him up. In return for life without possibility of parole, he confessed to everything but the Lindbergh kidnapping. The grand jury had been particularly interested in the part of his story about how the judge had insisted that Felicia Mendoza must not be shot, how he wanted what he called "that little greaser" to suffer big-time before she died. I heard that one of the grand jurors fainted during Smits's vivid depiction of the crime, and that a veteran court stenographer had to be excused.

A week later, a scant forty-five minutes after Judge Downs issued her final instructions, the jury delivered a verdict of aggravated murder in the first degree, with a recommendation for the death penalty.

On my way down the courthouse steps after the verdict, Rebecca clung to my good arm with both hands. About halfway down, Tracy Tanaka of KOMO TV-9 shoved a microphone in front of my face. "How do you feel about the verdict, Mr. Waterman?" she asked.

I answered without thinking. "I feel lighter," I said. "Much lighter." Tracy made a disgusted face and sprinted up the steps toward Dan Hennessey. Rebecca hugged my arm tighter. ●

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Easter Song

byPeggy Wysong

Rollo Bunny hated kids
Easter sent him on the skids
He plotted various ways and means
And dreamed truly horrid scenes

With phony little bunny-smiles
He laid out eggs of crocodiles
Of dragons and of dinosaurs
In ones and twos and threes and fours

He'd painted them in pastel hues—
Greens and pinks and pretty blues
For little children's eager grasp
Oh! hatching time would be a blast!

Rollo toiled, all red in face
One more egg to put in place
A great big egg—what could it be?
Alas, it slipped and hit a tree

A Tyrannosaurus Rex jumped out
And snapped up Rollo with a shout!
All dropped their eggs and ran away
To find another place to play

Don't trust the Easter Bunny
He ain't all milk and honey
For rabbits don't lay eggs, you see,
So Easter don't come naturally.

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DIARY OF A DISAPPEARANCE

by Donald L. Shirer

Whatever happened to Solomon Grundy?
He misplaced his wife on a stormy dark Monday.
Told all of his friends who happened to call
She never came home from a trip to the mall.

Appeared on the evening TV show on Tuesday
A bit premature, but it was a slow news day.
Appealed to the viewers, the cops and the Lord,
"If you see Sarah Grundy, two hundred reward."

He went to the precinct next morning on Wed.
And voiced his suspicion that Sarah was dead.
"Gone forty-eight hours," said sergeant MacPherson,
"I guess we'll declare her a true missing person."

The local police went to work with a blur.
And hunted for Sarah till sundown on Thur.
No hospital, bus station, motel or house
Had seen hide nor hair of the absentee spouse.

Detective Smith back from vacation on Friday,
Had quite soon concluded the case wasn't tidy.
He found by inquiry without too much labor,
That Solomon seemed much too fond of his neighbor.

So thanks to this clue on the following Sat.
He centered the search on the grounds near their flat.
And after two bloodhounds exerted their noses,
A spade turned up Sarah in soil near the roses.

Whatever happened to Solomon Grundy?
Arrested and charged and imprisoned on Sunday.
His mistake, on conviction, he said in disgrace,
Was assuming the cops couldn't solve a week case.

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NEXT ISSUE...

Spooked
BY CAROLYN HART

Her Mother's Secrets
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

The Message of the Stars
BY MICHAEL GILBERT

Triangle
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

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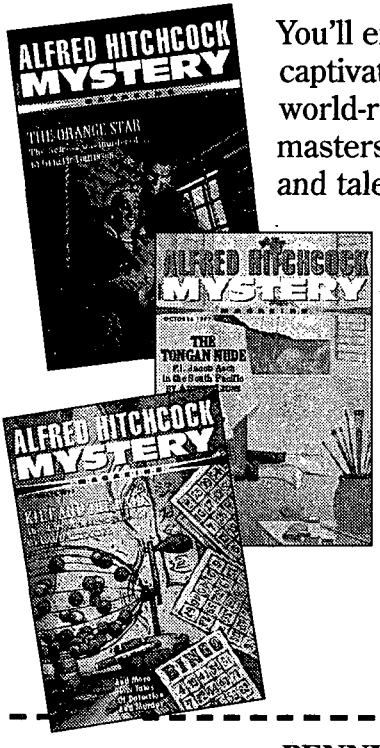

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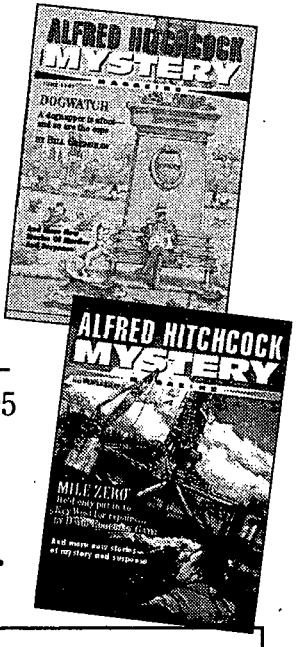

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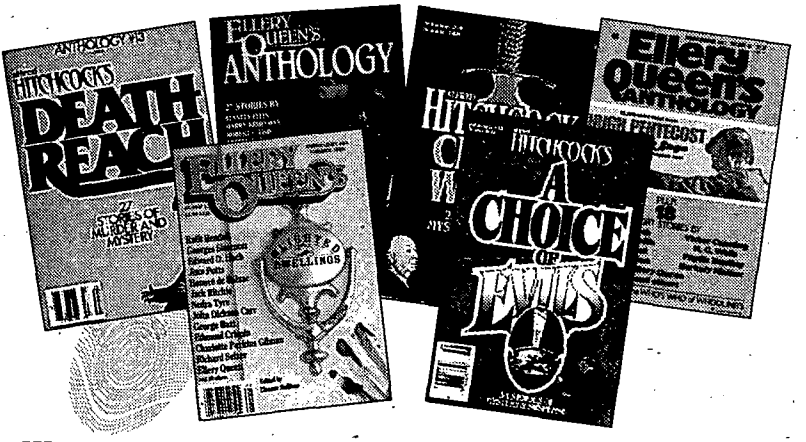

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

Finally—a "cure" for bad breath!

For years, the cause of chronic bad breath has been misdiagnosed, but a dentist's research has led to TheraBreath™, a dramatic treatment system that works naturally and effectively.

It is estimated that over 80 million people worldwide suffer from bad breath, or halitosis. In the past, treatment has consisted of masking the odor with mouthwashes or mints, flooding the mouth with alcohol-based rinses, or the latest craze, popping pills that claim to cure the problem in the stomach. None of these treatments work, because halitosis is caused by bacteria on the back of the tongue and upper throat that produce sulfurous gases. The way to stop bad breath is to stop this process, and this is the secret behind the revolutionary TheraBreath™ system.

A scientific solution. As a dentist with a degree in bacteriology, Dr. Harold Katz has been keenly aware of the widespread nature of this problem. It was not until his daughter came to him about her halitosis, however, that he began to research the problem in earnest. His studies led him to an amazing discovery about the source of bad breath: it does not originate in the digestive system, and the food you eat has no direct effect on your breath.

Dear Dr. Katz,

Our son has had a breath problem for years. He tried mouthwashes and mints. We took him to doctors and dentists, and even had his tonsils removed. Nothing worked, until he tried your product. I am so thankful and thrilled that you found the solution to his problem. You'll never know how much you changed his life!

—M.C., Los Angeles

Certain foods, however, contribute to the production of sulfurous gases in the back of the mouth. Mints and mouthwashes intended to mask or prevent bad breath actually worsen the condition because sugar and alcohol dry out the mouth. Many common medications for everything from high blood pressure to depression have the same drying effect, resulting in the formation of odorous gases. Mucous from post-nasal drip contains dense proteins that are full of sulfur. Some treatments for halitosis contain Sodium Lauryl Sulfate, which can cause canker sores. The only effective means of eliminating the sulfur gas production is to introduce oxygen to the bacteria, causing them to produce tasteless, odorless sulfates.

Effective, safe and natural. At his California Breath Clinic, Dr. Katz has perfected a five-step program for treating halitosis. By using these products on a regular basis, chronic halitosis sufferers can end their problem. The TheraBreath system eliminates the problem of bitter or sour taste in the mouth, improves general periodontal health and will even whiten teeth. TheraBreath has a mild spearmint flavor that tastes great and creates pleasant, neutral breath. It contains no SLS compounds, so you will not suffer from an increase in canker sores or any other side effects. These products are all-natural and simply introduce a greater amount of oxygen into the mouth's chemistry.

Try it risk-free. Try the TheraBreath System for yourself with our risk-free home trial. If you are not fully satisfied, just return it within 30 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

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TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

"For years I had trouble sleeping restfully—now I know the problem was in my mattress!"

NatureSleep™ Platinum features comfort zones that match your body's shape and promote restful, therapeutic sleep.

COMFORT ZONES
- •ZONE 1- Upper Neck and Head
- •ZONE 2- Shoulders
- •ZONE 3- Lower Back
- •ZONE 4- Hips & Buttocks
- •ZONE 5- Upper Legs

Traditional mattresses leave your lower back and legs unsupported and hinder proper circulation. Even expensive waterbeds, which are supposed to distribute weight evenly, fail to support the body properly. Your spine arches downward, in a position specialists refer to as "hammocking," causing excessive strain on the back. Scientists and doctors agree that the ideal position is a neutral body posture which the different parts of the human body are supported individually and evenly. This is the secret behind NatureSleep Platinum, the revolutionary product that turns any bed into the ideal sleep surface.

Scientific solution. Anatomic Concepts, a medical products research and manufacturing company, has designed the ultimate mattress pad. Using research originally conducted for hospitals, this innovative company developed an effective, affordable way to transform any mattress into a specially-designed sleep surface that closely matches the shape of the human body. It features a patented five-zone sleep surface that holds the body in a neutral posture and redistributes pressure during sleep.

Comfort zones. The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure. Until now, only the most expensive and most advanced mattress products featured this degree of technology, but now you can get it without even buying a new mattress.

The distinct comfort zones in NatureSleep Platinum have revolutionized the sleep-product industry. They reduce sleep stress—especially strain on the spine—and cradle those areas of the body prone to increased pressure.

Installs in seconds. NatureSleep Platinum fits right over your existing mattress, uses normal sheets and turns any bed into an anatomically-correct and incredibly comfortable sleep surface. The five comfort zones have been created using a computer-designed grid pattern and are engineered to accommodate people of all heights and sizes.

Risk-free. Try it for yourself, it comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If for any reason you are not completely satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

NatureSleep™ Platinum:

Twin	**$59.95**	$8 S&H
Double	**$89.95**	$10 S&H
Queen	**$99.95**	$12 S&H
King	**$119.95**	$14 S&H

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